Rare Birds:
A Global Ethnography of Ethiopian Circus Performers

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For my Guru, and for Nebiyu and the Abyssinia Jugglers - who taught me the necessity of dreaming big, and of the many dangers of deviating from the path…

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Abstract

This thesis presents a multi-sited ethnography of Ethiopian circus performers who trained in China on an acrobatics cultural exchange and subsequently performed in an 'African' themed circus production in Europe. In an international field I follow a troupe of six, the Habesha Jugglers, and explore how they negotiated their presence within the embodied reality of dealing with chronic racism in China and Europe, where ideas about African bodies and being 'African' often mattered more than individual and ethnic identities. Their willingness to play to racial and cultural stereotypes in the show was a determining factor in their presence on tour, and was measured against a deep-seated desire to make a better life for oneself and one's family within the bigger scheme of things. Along with the production's cast, the troupe sought to reconcile outside racist perceptions and representations by emphasizing the importance of working hard with one's body, thus increasing their own market value and mobility in the corporeal economy of circus. It is my aim to make a significant contribution to the field by moving away from popular scholarly analytics that deal from, and with, a spectator-oriented vantage point regarding onstage representation in circus. With this thesis I reorient the anthropological focus to the lived day-to-day immediate experiences of circus performers by telling the Habesha Jugglers' story. It is ultimately a simple and powerful ethnographic narrative about Ethiopian circus performers trying to make better lives for themselves while dealing with viscerally rooted racism and living in highly trained 'valuable' black bodies within a global circus market.

INTRODUCTION

The Beginning

"Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?"

- Matthew 6:26-34, in *Selma*

"Now when I was being taught this, I got burned every time, and I still get burned occasionally, but the burns you get from fire-eating are for the most part extremely minor…. I'm not talking mind-over-matter jive. There's no such thing, it just hurts like holy hell. But it's not dangerous. The dangerous thing is something lay people don't even think about. And that is every time you do this act, no matter how carefully or how well, you swallow about a teaspoon of the lighter fluid, and that stuff is poisonous - that's why they write 'Harmful or Fatal if Swallowed' right there on the can--and the effect is, to a certain degree, cumulative…. Now I take the time to explain all of this to you in such detail because I think it's more fascinating to think of someone poisoning themselves to death slowly on stage than merely burning themselves, and after all, we're here to entertain you. I really tell you this 'cause this is the last bit in the show, and when you leave here tonight and you're thinking about our show, as I hope you will be, I don't want you to be thinking about *how* we did it. I want you to be thinking about *why*. So sit back and relax, I'm going to burn myself."

- Penn Jillette, *Eating Fire*, excerpt from a performance

'Circus'

The business of circus is founded upon a successful ability to blur the boundaries between reality and illusion. Its world contains the unimagined/impossible embodied within an indecipherable code of performers' 'tricks' - visible, but not understandable; experienceable, but indescribable; "in town for a few days only, and yet being there, in time, 'since ever'" (Carmeli 2003: 68). It is a world constituted by the startling reality of human performative potential living side by side with the fantastical conjurings that the infamous wandering tent has fabricated in and about itself. 'To see is to believe', we are told - but in this paradoxical "spectacle of actuality" (Hippisley Coxe 1980: 225), it becomes impossible to believe what we see as the circus could

unfold before our very eyes in an unapologetic display, willingly and even enjoyably subjecting itself to the penetration of the 360 degree gaze of the audience, and ending up in a inverted Panopticon of sorts (Bentham 1995: 29-95; Assael 2005: 154).

The economically driven circus entertainment industry has founded itself quite precariously upon performing, selling, and participating in its own daring feats of risk (bodily, artistically, and economically). But much of what is publicly known to be 'real' about circus has been frustratingly pieced together out of the only existing 'raw' material evidence left by spectacle's glittering peripatetic, sometimes-seedy, trickster performers - posters, flyers, and other unrelenting and inexhaustible efforts at self-promotion (Stoddart 2000: 49-60); advertising paraphernalia that collided 'reality' with 'illusion' in the public's eye, and shattered circus into a world of such compelling and indistinguishable ambiguity that it stood outside of conventional life's limits of possibility. And a world was created where acrobats, animals, conjurers, and freaks[1] performed the tasks of daily life with twists so obscene they seduced everyone from proletarian babies to haughty society ladies into heeding their showman's call.

The 'modern' circus, as much as historians can actually agree upon it, was officially erected in London, January 9 in the year 1768; born to the proud single parent Philip Astley, equestrian entrepreneur extraordinaire (Speaight 1980: 31-33; Stoddart 2000: 13; Davis 2002: 16; et al.).[2] Circus's humble beginnings were then quickly brought

[1] Side Show (introduced by circus innovator, P.T. Barnum) was primarily a phenomenon seen in the American circus (Assael 2005).
[2] Astley's main contribution to the evolution of circus was the addition of the 'ring' as a performance space. By presenting equestrian tricks in a circular space, not only would the horses be rescued from having to slow down, stop, and turn around for each new trick, but the riders would also be assisted by the addition of centripetal and centrifugal forces in executing their manoeuvres (Tait 2005: 5).

into fruition in the U.K, and Europe,[3] assisted by Astley and other key players (who were also deeply involved with horsemanship).[4] Loosely defined by Truzzi as "a traveling and organized display of animals and skilled performances within one or more circular stages known as 'rings' before an audience encircling these activities" (Truzzi 1968: 315; Chindahl 1959; Bouissac 1976; Speaight 1980; Culhane 1991; et al.), circus is a colourful, contested, and contradictory performance genre; as debatable amongst its practitioners as it is amongst its scholars, perhaps even more so.

Mainstream historical documentation of 'circus' is, inevitably, a history of circus in the United States, Great Britain, and Europe. It is a history that draws explicit connections between the growth of the circus as an industry, fed by monopoly capitalism, and the unquenchable imperialist and expansionist agendas of Britain and America (Davis 2002: 203-206). And as a history, it has, in short, been cultivated as a tool to document Western Empire's shady colonial past. In the production of the 'Wild West' shows that dominated American circus,[5] for example, spectacle embodied the celebration of U.S. and British imperialism by showcasing "little wars of empire" (Springhall: 1990) and publicly aligned its political stance with that of its audiences (Davis 2002: 199-226) – whatever they may be. But, as Stoddart keenly remarks:

> There was a very marked tension between the discourse of patriotism which may have been mobilized opportunistically by circuses with different national basis in response to fashion and political events in

[3] Circuses in the U.S. and in Europe were forceful influences on the international development of circus - as much as it can be called a generic performance genre. Unfortunately, their histories are far too extensive to provide any 'just' synopses of them for our purposes here. For in-depth, thorough, and thoroughly satisfying accounts, see Janet Davis', 'The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top' (2002), and Brenda Assael's 'Circus and Victorian Society' (2005), respectively.

[4] It was three "European circus pioneers" in particular – Giuseppe Chiarini, Jaques Tournaire, and Louis Soullier – who stood to take credit for bringing the circus to Latin America, South East Asia, Australia, South Africa, India, Russia, and China (Circus Historical Society 2006).

[5] Wild West shows included representations of various 'exotic' cultures, oftentimes depicted as the losing side in gruesome battle-scene re-enactments (Davis 2002: 199-226).

> order to bolster their status and popular support, and the institutional reality of a popular entertainment which has always been *constitutionally international*, and at the same time, *strategically xenophobic* (Stoddart 2000: 71, emphasis mine).

The conflicted imagery of circus battle scenes – a patchwork of rival nations pitted against each other in a sequined spandex fight to the predictable imperialism-prevailing finish – unified the space of the circus tent as a condensed world of international fraternity; circus became an internationally harmonious stew where Western Capitalism triumphed in a spectacle designed to please the morally-troubled, country-loving eyes of its audience members. And paradoxically, "that which made the circus distinctly American… was also that which marked it as internationalist" (ibid. 40). That said, there are vague connections that have been made between the relationship of modern forms of circus to acrobatic performances of ancient Rome,[6] Greece, Egypt, and China dating back several thousand years, but historical accounts tend to rule out any serious consideration of 'circus's ties to these ancient bodily practices for their lack of a coherent conformity to circus's modern-day recipe: Ring. Acrobats. Animals. Clowns.

Despite the above historical and performance studies scholarship on spectacle, circus has posed some interesting problems for anthropology. In particular, this is reflected in a dire lack of ethnographic and other anthropological accounts of the genre. There are several likely reasons for this lack of anthropological scholarship. First of all, circus is a "very closed world," as one American circus performer put it to me. Although in some respects there are components of circus training that are opening up new possibilities for research, particularly with the growth of social circus and the

[6]The gladiator sports of Circus Maximus, amongst others, took place in a ring and included acrobatics and animal performance alongside the arena's blood-lusty main attractions (Speaight 1980).

applied studies that are being tacked onto the expansion of circus in that capacity, ethnographies that have been conducted on touring circuses are few and far between. Most researchers who have managed to access touring shows have done so on a smaller, generally local or perhaps national scale (see Bouissac 1971, 1976; Carmeli 2003). For example, one of the most established anthropologists of circus has taken semiotic analyses as his port of call (Bouissac 1971, 1976, 2012). The peripatetic practices of circuses, which have leaned towards a familial style of operation, are no doubt also part of the problem of circus access. 'Outsiders' of the circus tour, or world, are frequently kept on the other side of the real and imagined boundary or fence. Along with this element of containment on tour is the fact that, as any circus performer from the U.S., UK, or Europe will tell you, there is a strong sense of shared identity about being a 'circus person' that can seemingly transcend many otherwise insidious notions of 'difference', be they cultural, social, or corporeal. This form of circus identity is powerful, and perhaps acts as a hindrance to academic folk who wish to 'know' more about circus life.

Access to circus for the researcher has also been challenged by the extreme bodily practices of spectacle. Circuses display a corporeal world that, unless a person has gone through circus training, is very difficult to gain access to beyond the act of spectating. The phenomenological gap between a circus spectator's perceptions, and a circus performer's experience is wide indeed. It also habituates analyses that are informed by their vantage point: that of the outside, and arguably problematic Gaze, in a Foucauldian sense of the term. Some recent graduate level scholarship has been conducted by circus-trained individuals outside of the anthropological discipline and has attempted to address this gap, but these performance studies projects have focused

primarily on the processes of training within a fixed location, rather than on the lived experience of a performer in the context of a circus tour across global space. Other more prominent scholarship carried out in performance studies or history departments has duly treated circus bodies as a point of interest, and has been remarkable for the insight it has brought regarding the intersections of representation, history, politics, and corporeality (Tait 2005; Farrell 2007; Davis 2014). These accounts have tended to look towards the body more in terms of representation, though, or at the very least in relationship to its spectator. However, optimistically they point to the fact that inquiries into the role of the body within circus are becoming steadily more popular, indicating scholarly acknowledgement of the immediacy of corporeality within the genre of spectacle is slowly but surely moving more towards present day interest in circus rather than just a historical one.

Nonetheless, this problem of how to rectify anthropology and circus has led to the majority of research on circus being conducted through the lens of history and performance studies, with particular focus placed on circus in the U.S., UK, Canada, Australia, and Europe. The logic of this geographic fixation is based upon the fact that these countries have notably been where the big business of global circus first arrived, and has predominantly thrived. Analyses of a political economic orientation have rightly sought to frame the rise of circus within the political expansion of empire and the rise of monopoly capitalism within these 'first world' countries (Davis 2002). Within this scholarship some attention has been paid to how processes of displaying 'Other', foreign bodies and cultures served in the production and reflection of an Orientalizing discourse in the 'West' (Lindfors 1983, 1999; Thompson 1996; MacGregory 2007). Literature that has taken it upon itself to spotlight this process of

'Othering' in the circus has also tended to do so either by focusing on onstage representation, or the telling of individual historical narratives of some of the 'foreign' bodies that found themselves – either by choice or by coercion - in the centre of the spectacular ring (Poignant 2004). There has also been some, though not much, related (in subject matter only) research conducted on circuses within non-'Western' countries. Most relevant to this thesis are studies about circus in Ethiopia, and academic accounts of Chinese acrobatics and circus, both of which I cover below. Despite the problem of field access, it is curious, given the parallels that exist between early circus displays of corporeal 'differences' and anthropological and ethnological conventions/congresses that took up the same practice in the name of 'science', that anthropological inquiries into the lived experiences of circus performers haven't sought to rectify anthropology's sordid past. Clearly the politics of representation are strongly at play in the world of spectacle and anthropology alike, and this fruitful conundrum has thus far proven a rich and fertile ground for scholarship on circus. However, it is my aim in this thesis to tell an altogether different anthropological tale about 'circus'.

The Story

During my research I followed a troupe of six Ethiopian circus performers – the Habesha Jugglers - across China, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Italy and Ethiopia. The Habesha Jugglers trained in China on acrobatics cultural exchange and subsequently performed in an 'African' themed European circus tour. Within this international and multi-sited field, emerging identities amongst the group proved to be complex, culturally hybrid (Gilroy 1987; Bhabha 1994; Appadurai 1995; Hall 2000), and corporeally-rooted (Bowman 2004). In China and in Europe, the individual and

national identities of the Habesha Jugglers mattered less than Chinese and European ideas about African bodies/being 'African', and the embodied reality of dealing with chronic racism was negotiated against a deep-seated desire to make a better life for oneself and one's family. During acrobatic training in China, for example, the Habesha Jugglers and other African exchange students were not called by their individual names. Instead, they were referred to (both directly and indirectly) as "Africa" by their Chinese hosts. They also experienced the weekly occurrence of Chinese village locals clutching at their noses, and crossing the street in order to gain some physical and olfactory distance from the African students, whom they believed smelled bad. On tour in Europe, however, racism took on quite a different flair. The all-German Production Crew, for instance, expressed exasperation at the African "freaks" who needed to make too many "loud noises" with their mobile phones in the catering area, and who were culturally incapable of organizing their props on the truck in a sensible fashion during nightly Load Outs.[7] In other words, discourses on racism in China had more to do with one's corporeality, whereas in Europe they were more centred on one's relationship to material objects. Despite the various forms of racism that the Habesha Jugglers experienced across global borders, performers' willingness to play to racial and cultural stereotypes if it would help make that better life was a determining factor in their presence on tour, but they sought to reconcile these outside racist perceptions and representations by emphasizing the importance of working hard with one's body, thus increasing their own market value and mobility. Their story is a simple and powerful tale whereby political connections and the desire for a better life led them to training in China, and the latter led them to touring in Europe. As such, it is also a story about living in highly trained, 'valuable', black bodies and the racism

[7] Load Out was when the show was broken down after the night's performance before the next move.

they experienced because of it. But although theirs is a story in which their bodies took centre stage (both literally and figuratively), it is not a story about *how* they did what they did with and within their bodies; it is a story about *why*.

In telling the Habesha Jugglers' story, it is my aim to make a unique and valuable contribution to the discipline of anthropology by presenting the first thickly descriptive (Geertz 1973), laterally critical ethnographic account of a troupe of circus performers in the current international realm of spectacle. For our purposes here, I define laterally critical ethnography as a self-reflexive anthropological literary form that draws its power relational and political critique from an evocative and ethnographic means of implicit storytelling. Although this thesis utilizes that literary technique to tell the tale of six individual performers, the Habesha Jugglers' story will, I believe, also speak more broadly to other stories of Ethiopian, African, and *other* 'Other' circus performers working within a global field today. Within the context of the unfolding of this thick ethnography, which rises out of a culturally syncretic[8] field, it will serve us well to remember that:

> What is theoretically imperative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. The 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, an innovative site of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining society itself (Bhabha 1994: 2).

The in-between spaces in the Habesha Jugglers' peripatetic global field were everywhere. As this thesis will explore, it was precisely those in-between spaces in

[8] Paul Gilroy's notion of cultural syncretism, as the "raw materials for creative processes which redefine what it means to be black, adapting it to distinctively British experiences and meanings. Black culture is actively made and remade" (Gilroy 1987: 202).

which cultural syncretism was embodied and inscribed on and into their flesh in creative, strategic, and regrettably symbolically violent ways.

The notion of 'in-betweeness' likewise comes into play in relation to how the flexibility of 'circus' factored into the Habesha Jugglers' narrative, which is worthy of our brief attention here. Although there is tentative agreement about the recipe for modern-day spectacle, debates about what defines 'circus' are ongoing and contested amongst circus practitioners and scholars alike. What circus 'is' varies across time and space. Circuses come in many different shapes, sizes, and subsequent forms around the globe. Some circuses find their stages within the ring of a tent; others use large theatrical venues as their performances' port of call; and yet others still find their homes in outside public squares. Some incorporate animals into their shows more traditionally, while others embrace an animal-free 'new circus' aesthetic instead. For the purposes of this thesis, and considering the fact that the geographic space traversed during my fieldwork spanned six countries and three continents, I follow Rosemary Farrell's flexible, inclusive and open-ended definition of circus as consisting of "live performances of circus skills that are legitimately linked to the history of modern circus" (2007: 20). This definition will make it possible to include all versions of performance and practice spaces the Habesha Jugglers inhabited, including circuses in Ethiopia, a European 'African' themed circus, and an acrobatics training facility in China. As a prelude to presenting the ethnography, I will build on the question of what the scholarly relationship may be between the 'Western' (i.e. Australian, European, British, and American) circuses discussed above, circus in Ethiopia, and Chinese acrobatics. This theoretical positioning will set the stage to ethnographically place the Habesha Jugglers within the 'in-betweeen' spaces of

having been brought up in Ethiopian circus schools, trained liminally in China, and then travelling internationally with a so-called 'African' circus in Europe.

Ethiopia

Circus in Ethiopia is a relatively recent phenomenon. One of the only scholars to conduct research on the topic, Leah Niederstadt, has written an in-depth account on Ethiopian circus (Niederstadt 2011, 2009), which I will briefly outline here. The first organized circus group was established in Ethiopia in 1991 jointly by a French-Canadian (British) man named Marc LaChance, and an American ex-patriot, Andy Goldman. The two met when the National Association employed Goldman for the Care of Ethiopian Jews and LaChance moved to Addis Ababa in 1990 to fill a position as a teacher at the Addis Ababa International Community School. LaChance had picked up some amateur circus skills during his time as a student at McGill University in Montréal, and Goldman requested that he perform for the children at the organization Goldman was working for. LaChance's performance was a success, and in his spare time he casually began teaching circus skills (juggling, walking on a low beam, and balancing broomsticks) to the Jewish kids who made up his audience. They crafted a small show to perform for family members. Shortly after, the children LaChance had been instructing were airlifted to Israel, causing him to shift his attention to schooling a new group of community kids. Within a few months, the new dedicated group performed publicly in an open space to a very receptive crowd of several hundred people. LaChance's 'hobby' of teaching circus skills to local children in his spare time began to take root. Inspired by the success of their local circus endeavour, LaChance and Goldman envisioned a greater project of passing on corporeal circus knowledge to disadvantaged local youth as a way to empower a

community whose fundamental resources were seen as lacking. The duo officially established Circus Addis Ababa (née Circus Ethiopia) not long thereafter in 1991.

Over time, more branches of circus were established within the country, and in 1993 an umbrella group – which I will refer to as the circus Board - was erected to unify, oversee and manage the growing circuses in Ethiopia. The project got so big that LaChance decided to devote himself to it full time. He ceased teaching at the Addis Ababa International Community School, and focused completely on growing circuses in Ethiopia. In order to fund and support this expanding project, LaChance established important connections with NGOs, development organizations, and Cirque du Soleil. Although it would be roughly four years before they formed their Cirque du Monde program (which greatly supported the circus board in its initial stages), beginning in 1993 Cirque du Soleil donated a significant portion of props and material support to the circus' cause along the way. By the mid-nineties, used Lycra costumes, crash pads, and other donated materials provided by Cirque du Soleil, wrapped themselves around, encircled, cushioned, were shaped to, and literally supported Ethiopian circus performers' receptive bodies. Along with Cirque's help, a wide range of other support came from a handful of NGOs and development organizations (including Oxfam, the International and Ethiopian Committees of the Red Cross, NOVIB, and UNICEF), and it greatly influenced the shape that 'Ethiopian' circus would come to be recognized by.

Ethiopian circus performances were generally performed outside for the public, and because of the NGO funding, they were free to attend. According to Niederstadt, one of the defining elements that circuses in Ethiopia came to be known for was the

inclusion of miniature morality plays - again at the impetus of donor agencies - the subjects of which were oftentimes the discursive values of health, hygiene, HIV protection, landmine awareness, disease prevention, and overall well-being amongst Ethiopia's citizens (Niederstadt 2011, 2009; Llewellyn 2011: 27-28). Heavy reliance on NGO and government sponsored funding insured that circuses in Ethiopia were integrated with a moral component nurtured by the agendas of the agencies from which the money and resources flowed. The integration of these narrative-driven story lines into sequences of music and circus performances formed a loose structure for the shape of public circus performances in Ethiopia to begin to model themselves against. The physical and financial accessibility of shows guaranteed that their educational content would reach a wide spectrum of audience members. In a sense, Niederstadt explains, Ethiopian circuses were similar to other forms of African development theatre (2009: 77-78; Llewellyn 2011: 27-28), but still distinguishable by their inclusion of circus skills interwoven with moral narrative dramas. Niederstadt claims that the practice of incorporating educational messages into circus performances began to produce a type of circus that was identifiable by its discursive content as particularly 'Ethiopian' (Niederstadt 2009, 2011; Llewellyn 2011). The inclusion of NGO and State sponsored didactic story lines encouraged spectators of Ethiopian circuses to embrace the qualities of 'development' and 'progress', which would be made visible in individual follow-through acts of using condoms, getting tested for HIV, and abstaining from such 'backwards' practices as marriage by abduction - acts that had been portrayed within the content of circus performances.

Llewellyn points to the significance of the fact that this type of development-laden circus began to flourish in Ethiopia in 1991 under the newly co-opted transitional rule

of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi (the TPLF leader) (2011: 31, 47). Likewise, Niederstadt highlights that when LaChance and Goldman first began their project, the Derg (Ethiopia's socialist regime) had been on its last legs. It wasn't until May 1991, around the same time that LaChance's first group of Jewish children were airlifted to Israel that the Derg finally fell at the hands of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Movement (EPRDM). The Derg's leader, Mengistu Haile Marium fled to Zimbabwe, and the TPLF along with the EPRDM took hold of the government under the united front of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), with Zenawi as their head (Niederstadt 2011: 326). At this precise historical moment, the ethos of democratic possibility permeated both the Ethiopian public's imaginaries, as well as those of the leaders who were coming into the spotlight. It also laid the ideological groundwork for the potential construction of a type of circus that, as Niederstadt and Llewellyn both argue, was distinct to Ethiopia. But it was foreign NGOs' and government agencies' willingness to get on board as donors in the name of national education that was the guarantee to seal the deal.

When the EPRDF-led Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) came into power in 1991, it announced its intention to segue into a unique form of ethnically based democratic federalism. By grounding organized political representation around the notion of ethnicity, this strategy attempted to address the national question that had plagued Ethiopia for decades (Keller 2002: 28-29; Joireman 1997: 388). As a result, ethnicity became the primary road to mobilization in a country that defined itself in the new constitution as a multicultural federation founded on representation of ethnonationalities. The new leadership's embrace of the possibility of ethnic

federalism assured that discourses on the importance of the nation-state's cultural diversity would find suitable expression in the process of cultivating an aesthetic regime for 'Ethiopian' circuses. In fact, it would become the second most defining factor.

On the road to evolving their own form of 'Ethiopian' circus, circuses in Ethiopia began to incorporate government rhetoric about celebrating and expressing Ethiopia's diverse ethnic heritage as a means of educating audiences on the wealth of cultures that made up their unique nation-state. Multiple cultural markers (including costumes, dance styles, and musical repertoire) were displayed in a single performance, an aesthetic reflection of the wide variety of Ethiopia's multi-cultural ethnicities. Costumes were often procured from sources that specialized in marketing and selling cultural clothing (Niederstadt 2009: 82). Those used in Ethiopia's circus productions would either be associated with a particular ethnic group, or would fall into the categories of general 'African' style, or Cirque du Soleil style (ibid.). Circus directors often made an effort to match the ethnic style of costume with the correct ethnic style of music in performances (ibid.), and musicians learned to play a range of ethnic music styles just as circus performers from different troupes trained to execute a range of regional dances. Music developed as an integral part of circus performances in Ethiopia, and the training of musicians in circuses became a standard practice of 'Ethiopian' circuses.

Initially copying so-called western circus traditions gradually gave way to the notion that circus in Ethiopia had evolved into its own unique form, in which ethnic diversity was institutionalized as part of the moral project of empowering Ethiopian youth

through the development of their circus skills. Aweke Emeru, a former Circus Ethiopia performer said:

> When we started Circus Ethiopia, we began by copying Western circus tradition. However today we are evolving our own Ethiopian form of circus, combining many of our own cultural traditions. For instance the western circus focuses traditionally on the individual act, like high wire, acrobatics with the drum roll highlighting the individual drama and danger. Our style is more of a group activity, with less emphasis on individual acts of daring. We also incorporate many traditional cultural elements of dance and song in our routines (Circus Ethiopia 2015).

The combination of ethnic diversity and extraordinary corporeal performances created a seemingly even playing field between Ethiopia's regional cultures, which were all 'equally' empowered within the powerful actions of the performers on stage. This, of course, propped up the aspirations of the TGE, as they embarked on a two year goal of politically and administratively reorganizing the country, which involved drafting a constitution, organizing national elections (Keller 2002: 1; Joireman 1999: 388), and dividing Ethiopia into nine different regions based on their so-called ethnic distinctions.

Similar to the patriotic discourses incorporated into American and British circuses and in Wild West shows, modelling show content based on the country's own ethnically diverse population constructed a microcosmic harmonious political model in which Ethiopia's many cultures could peacefully, successfully, and even joyfully coexist with one another under the umbrella of one unified performance. In this sense, circus universally acted as an ambiguous, flexible microcosmic site that was capable of incorporating extremely diverse political agendas across distinct and divergent continents and 'cultures' to play themselves out in; a globally adaptable mobile assemblage in which moral, political and medical discourses, ethnic markers, and moving bodies were the key components. However, 'Ethiopian' circuses aimed to

mobilize audience members and performers by reinforcing the sense that the political changes occurring in Ethiopia would ultimately direct the country towards the successful realization of a distinctly 'Ethiopian' form of government, capable of tackling the 'national question' once and for all.

The establishment of one national circus Board was central to the process of building a structured institutional model for training and organizing aspiring Ethiopian circus performers who belonged to its member troupes. After the founding of Circus Addis Ababa in 1991, three other circus troupes were subsequently erected over the next several years in different cities: Circus Nazareth, Circus Jimma, and Circus Tigray. The four circus troupes eventually came together under the Board's umbrella organization, which was officially recognized by the Ethiopian Government and registered as an NGO in 1993. Circus Dire Dawa was established and joined after that (Circus in Ethiopia 2003; Niederstadt 2009: 79, 87). The Board had five Main Branches (Addis Ababa, Nazareth, Jimma, Tigray, and Dire Dawa), and over time, as other circuses formed around Ethiopia, it incorporated eight smaller circuses as Associate Members. The Board allocated the majority of funding, training, and support to the Main Branches, while the Associate Members only had access to limited resources in the form of training and administrative support (Niederstadt 2009: 79).

The Board disseminated its organizational objectives in the following statement:

> 1. To introduce circus arts to Ethiopia; 2. To provide recreational and educational opportunities to disadvantaged children and youth; 3. To serve as a medium for conveying messages on health matters, including HIV/AIDS, social issues, and the principles of the Red Cross; 4. To perform circus shows free of charge throughout Ethiopia; 5. To

> promote Ethiopian cultures both nationally and abroad (Circus in Ethiopia 2015).

Niederstadt outlines how the Board developed a three-tiered system that she labels a "circus model" (Niederstadt 2009: 80), which consisted of a School (C Group), a B Group, and a Main Group (A Group). Children started out in the School Group, and if they were progressing well enough they would be moved up to B Group. B Group rehearsed, but generally did not perform. The advanced members of B Group were often selected to move into the Main Group, which was the group that most often performed, both locally and internationally. I found in my research that this model was actually quite flexible. For example, B Group members often could and did perform within Ethiopia, depending on the circus. In terms of monetary compensation, Niederstadt states that Main Group performers earned an average of between $10-20 dollars per week as a stipend until this practice was ceased after 2005, leaving educational support, food, and healthcare as the main benefits for the group members (ibid: 79).

On top of overseeing corporeal and geographic movement in the circuses, the Board also acted as a channel for the funds, donations, and other forms of national and international support that flowed in to propagate its cause. When opportunities for international touring arose, the Board benefitted greatly from the revenue that was pulled in. This, of course, was to be a source of controversy. When Ethiopian circus members began to defect whilst abroad on tour, the performers pointed to corruption and unfair recompense for their labour as reasons they should not be forced to return home at the end of the tour. The Board was structured to act as a governing body for its Main Branch and Associate Member circuses, so by developing this three-tiered advancement model, and organizing special training sessions for trainers and

performers,[9] the organization aimed to regulate circuses through the production and regulation of individual bodies which were cultivated in line with the group-oriented goals articulated in their mission statement. This meant managing and controlling the movements of individual bodies and shows.

Creating an institutional body to organize circus involved two primary arenas where managerial expertise was called in to regulate physical movements: 1. The extreme movements of circus skills and acts, which occurred in training settings and performance spaces; and 2. The offstage movements of circus performers. Across the board, circus performers in Ethiopia were expected to uphold an upstanding presence within the regional communities they resided in and represented. This was the case in training, in performance, and in day-to-day life. In training, cultivating movements with integrity was the ultimate aim, and this implied a moral shift towards a better, more 'developed' body. In day-to-day offstage life, morality was tied to mundane behaviours, and movements outside of training were observed, assessed, and evaluated by institutional leadership to ensure they were in line with the virtuous standards of the Board. For example, the public taking of *khat*,[10] and alcohol was strictly forbidden amongst circus folk (Llewellyn: personal correspondence). Appropriate behaviour regarding association with the opposite sex was also rigorously enforced.[11] Llewellyn points to two girls who were kicked out and banned from Circus Debre Berhan when they were seen at local pubs, allegedly engaging in acts of prostitution (Llewellyn 2011: 83-84). Adhering to an unspoken respectable and

[9] "Workshops were given on the following issues: Child protection, Safety rules and first aid, Communication with audience, How to protect your body" (Circus in Ethiopia 2015).
[10] *Khat* is an intoxicant and a stimulant plant that is chewed to provide energy to its consumer.
[11] For example, local virginity pageants took place, and amongst at least one of the Main member circuses a few of the female artists proudly participated, some of whom had been gossiped about as being 'loose'. The contestants were required to produce medical certificates authenticating their virginity in order to qualify for the title.

presentable dress code was also an essential obligation. In other words, maintaining a compliant presence within Ethiopian circuses according to the Board's standards was mandatory for all of the members and performers.

The process of institutionalization directly addressed the problem of day-to-day movements by having managerial staffs for the Board's Main and Associate Member circuses to consistently keep their eyes on the circus performers who represented them. Some of the Board's circus support provided to the performers made it easier to oversee these daily offstage movements. For example, depending upon their roles in the hierarchical circus model, aspiring performers were provided with food, which they consumed at the circus. At one circus, the A Group received two meals a day, while the B Group received one meal a day. The most disadvantaged (i.e. homeless) youths in the C Group had all of their food provided, and they were also provided with accommodation. The commitment on the part of the circus to care for the most fundamental needs of their circus performers also gave management access (inadvertently or not) to so-called private spaces that provided a view of the performers' quasi-intimate lives more so than the physical training spaces did. The need to manage circus movements was nothing new to circus. The intervention of governments, agencies, promoters, and show staff in the cultivation, control, management, and growth of circus performers' physical movements has cut across geographical and temporal spaces prior to, and throughout, the development of 'circus' as a so-called distinct discipline (Davis 2014). For example, the harnessing of transgressive circus movements by governments in the institutional settings of state-run (circus) acrobatics troupes has frequently been a vital manoeuvre in the act of legitimizing communist and socialist practices.

China

The usurpation of circuses as spaces of ambiguity by political institutions with specific agendas aiming to mobilize the public in some type of way in the name of the state has been an established practice in China, Russia, Cuba, Korea, and other communist/post-socialist nation-states in the world. The institutionalized development of acrobatics (*zájì*) in China – as a practice distinct from circus (*măxì*) - is case in point. In his discussion of the Chinese acrobatic theatre, circus scholar Dominique Jando emphasizes this historical distinction:

> Chinese acrobats can be seen in many Western circus shows; the Chinese acrobatic theatre where they come from, however, is often mistakenly called 'Chinese circus' in the West. Although its artists perform acts of a similar genre and share with Western circus artists a similar background—that of the traveling fairground entertainers—their craft has evolved separately, with its own history and traditions (Jando: Chinese Acrobatic 2015).

Jando does note, however, that there were cross-pollinating spaces such as the giant medieval fairs of Eastern Europe that saw Chinese and European itinerant entertainers intermingling and exchanging skills (until the 18th century when the fairs disappeared). Like Chinese scholars of *zájì* (Fu 1985; et al.), Jando pays homage to the 'peasant' roots of Chinese acrobatics, emphasizing the inclusion of daily household objects such as tables, cups, saucers, plates, chairs, and pitchforks in the early development of *zájì* skills. He also highlights acts particularly considered to be Chinese acrobatic "specialties" (including hoop diving, cycling, tight wire, slack wire, Chinese poles, meteor juggling, teeterboard, and lion dance), whilst giving a nod to the on-going impact of the "cross-pollination" (Farrell 2007) between *zájì* and circus, of which Farrell's scholarship on Chinese circus training in Australia is primarily concerned. Rather than separating the two genres out from one another entirely,

however, she includes Chinese acrobatics as a "fundamental circus skill" in her analysis (2007: 18). Tim Holst's article, 'West Meets East: the Western Impact on Traditional Chinese Circus' also offers an interesting discussion about cross-pollination from the perspective of a high-level direct participant in bringing Chinese troupes abroad to the U.S. However, Jando's clear cut distinction is more in line with what my interlocutors in China thought. Ultimately Jando lists show content and venue location as the two most important differences between *măxì* and *zájì*. *Zájì* has always been purely acrobatic (sans aerial acts until recently) and has occupied the stage as its preferred performance space, whereas 'Western circus' has historically been equestrian-based with acrobatic elements included. Therefore, it has most often been performed in the round.

According to my Chinese interlocutors in the field, differentiation between the two genres was most often summed up as follows: 1. *Zájì* was associated with no animals, high levels of bodily acrobatics, cities, good training/living conditions, theatres (i.e. no tents), a stable income, and government ownership/operation; and 2. *Măxì* was associated with animals, low levels of bodily acrobatics, villages, poor training/living conditions (i.e., no food), tents, low to no income, and private ownership. Interestingly, although scholarship on *zájì* has focused unwaveringly on the discipline of Chinese acrobatics with the ultimate aim to document a single unified, albeit complex, 2,000-year plus history, many of my more senior elderly interlocutors in China pointed to an earlier time when they said there was no clear distinction between *zájì* and *măxì* in pre-1949 China. In any case, Chinese acrobatics was unarguably transformed under the pressures and aims of the post-1949 Maoist regime. The CCP spearheaded a process of institutional reform for the discipline of *zájì*; a discipline

that had, not unlike circus in Great Britain, long been associated with extreme movements that came in and out of favour with whatever ruling party held court (Fu 1985).

Not unlike the development of circus in Ethiopia, the institutionalization of *zájì* in China created effective ways to manage the extraordinary movements of potentially unruly and subversive bodies that had an on-going and extensive history of coming in and out of favour with the law. On a more concrete level, institutionalizing *zájì* involved streamlining corporeal movements in a way to create 'scientific' efficiency that could be directed towards increasingly high levels of perfection. Official government *zájì tuán* (acrobatic troupes) were established throughout the country. They housed aspiring performers in large training halls, who were registered in official capacity. Training processes were reformed, as was the efficiency of props. Increasing Chinese acrobatics skill levels involved incorporating evolving technologies and refined techniques of the body in order to lead to more complex and precarious bodily arrangements, and complex dynamic relationships between performers and objects within the institutional spaces of training and performing.

Through the structural process of institutionalizing these extreme corporeal practices, an ethos of a "good, better, best" training approach (Farrell 2007) was cultivated in regards to developing scientific, effective, and efficient methodologies for practitioners of *zájì*. Emphasizing mastering the basics over time, *zájì* was well on its way to complete reform in China:

> After more than two millennia of practically unchanged tradition, the Chinese acrobatic theatre, like China itself, has experienced a complete transformation at the dawn of the twenty-first century. It came with the realization that, in a global civilization, it is not their peculiarities, and

> thus their difference, which made the Chinese acrobats attractive, but *their extraordinary talent at constantly surpassing themselves*, which made them the best in their specialty within a global circus community (Jando: Chinese Acrobatic 2015, emphasis mine).

The institutionalization of acrobatics in China grew the discipline on national turf to an unparalleled degree. Acrobats were cultivated to no end, and to a very high degree at that. The market at home became over-saturated with people highly skilled in the arts of extraordinary corporeality, which gave a move towards international performances more weight in terms of the income, revenue, and positive attention it could generate for the Chinese nation-state. While this increasing global exposure blurred the art of Chinese acrobatics with that of circus for international audiences, at home in China, *zájì* came more into its own as a unique 'Chinese' cultural discipline, while simultaneously bearing the mark of international circus influence.

Processes of institutionalization of circus in Ethiopia and acrobatics in China organized corporeal acrobatic movements around the act of political mobilization, to one degree or another, initiated on the level of the state. In that spirit, circus performers' and acrobats' bodies became key sites for political and cultural discourses to play out in, with the duty to act as vehicles for cultural transmission, growth, and development. Davis has made a similar and convincing argument regarding the radical inversion of the American circus which was initially positioned as a site for morally bankrupt seductive and subversive bodies, but by the turn of the twentieth century, was "praised as a site of wholesome bodily improvement and moral instruction, an essential building block of patriotism and citizenship, and a powerful form of international influence" (Davis 2014: 43). She explores the intersections of the body of the child, play, physical culture and state formation, in an analysis that

builds on Foucault's version of biopower as the central agent for the remaking of children's bodies into civic and national subjects, as she locates them within the larger 'bodies' of the circus and the globe. Davis also touches on the intense regulation of performers' bodies in her historical account (Davis 2014: 43-44, 49-50), and lists practices such as circuses banning alcohol and gambling amongst its staff, and issuing fines for performers who were more than a minute late for their call time as indicative of this move towards movement regulation.[12] She ties the intensity of these practices to the moral overtones that circus engendered in its public. Davis' analysis rightly gives the broader political economy its due, but does not directly engage with the more intimate offstage experiences, identity formation, and day-to-day realities of circus performers who were engaged in that broader morally ambiguous climate of spectacle. A similar argument could be made about most scholarship on circus, historical accounts of acrobatics and circus in China, as well as depictions of 'Ethiopian' circus.

The Political Economy of Africans in China

As vehicles for so-called cultural transmission, growth, and development, Chinese acrobatic bodies became key sites for political and cultural discourses to play out in, and this has certain implications for the African bodies that were being trained abroad in China's very distinct version of *zájì*. The broader relevance of China/Africa relations and policy imperatives, as well as the broader institutional, political and cultural contexts that framed the exchange and the Habesha Jugglers' subsequent experiences in the circus industry are critical in situating the individual trajectories of the group's members, and I will outline them here accordingly.

[12] These practices are still commonplace, run of the mill ways of disciplining performers in circuses of all capacities today.

Growing international media interest in China's rise towards becoming a global superpower has frequently pointed to China-Africa relations as a questionable, and perhaps threatening, alliance, and called into question how it may undermine governments whose direct interests it will necessarily impact. Press attention to the developing dialogue between China and Africa has also led to an increased academic curiosity about China's African investments and development projects, and has drawn a fair number of critiques as to the purity of China's intentions. Labeled frequently by sceptical critics as a 'dragon' engaged in a more subtly threatening form of neocolonialism, China has taken its fair share of slack in regards to its 'no involvement' approach to Africa.

Compared to press and academic coverage of over-arching China-Africa relations, there has been proportionately less documentation on the evolving relationship between China and Ethiopia. However, China's role as a dominant building force in Ethiopia (and other African countries), involved in almost every part of the economy, saw Chinese companies building roughly 70-percent of the roads in Ethiopia, as well as being deeply involved in constructing bridges, railways, dams, highways, cell phone networks, news agreements, schools, pharmaceutical factories, technical assistance, and jamming equipment for Ethiopia's 'Information Network Security Agency' (Shinn & Eisenman 2012: 254, 272-273). Aside from providing the above's material infrastructure for roads, Chinese bodies have been deeply involved in the carrying out of these projects. In other words, China has quite literally been facilitating routes, mobilities, and pathways to different types of movement (i.e. roads, bridges, etc.), as well as impediments to movement (i.e. jamming equipment, dams,

etc.) in Ethiopia. China has worked similarly to assist in the development of, and investment in, other African countries, including Kenya and Sudan.

These growing political connections between China and various African countries, including Ethiopia, have led directly to acrobatics cultural exchanges between China and Africa. Cultural exchange has been an integral part of China's "package strategy" in developing and increasing its international relations with developing countries (ibid. 2012: 3), and there has been a growing popularity in the use of Traditional Chinese Acrobatics as an effective diplomatic tool with African countries in particular. These international acrobatics cultural exchanges proliferated and reached their peak around the time of my field research, yet they have been around for quite awhile.

The post-1949 institutionalization of *zájì* saw the corporeal discipline become inherently intertwined with the notion of Chinese culture and civilization. *Zájì* acts were comprised of embodied cultural actions that had a place inside the larger international circus world, but nonetheless remained distinctly Chinese. This made *zájì* a prime disciplinary candidate for the state's diplomatic purposes. Yet the notion of cultural exchange has followed *zájì* around like a shadow throughout its 2,000-plus years of history. Whether exchanges were arranged in official capacity, or just arose from happenstance occurrence, historical accounts of *zájì* refer to the importance of these exchanges to the growth and longevity of the discipline of Chinese acrobatics pre-1949 as well. Presently, and historically, cultural exchanges in acrobatics have encompassed more than just foreign students coming to China to train in *zájì*; they have also involved international performances by Chinese acrobats travelling abroad

in other countries. These performances have taken place at important government functions, meetings, amongst other places, and were a way for China to display an embodied version of the power of its own cultural-political values, impressing its esteemed cross-cultural audiences with high levels of the corporeal impossible.

As evidenced above, the vantage point that acrobatics was useful as a cultural tool and helped to build bridges and increase 'friendships' between nation-states has clearly stood the test of time. The status of *zájì* as a particularly Chinese form of performance guaranteed that the balance of power in regards to the perception of the China-Africa *zájì* exchanges would be presented in such a way when the Chinese media framed them, that the political relationship between China and Africa would be undoubtedly regarded as the central character under the spotlight, with China leading the way as a powerful mentor to a country such as Ethiopia, despite the trajectories of the individual bodies and stories of the African students that were participating in the exchange. Media presence was almost a daily occurrence in one form or another at the training halls where the foreigners on exchange were based while I was in China. English-language media published in China on the China-Africa cultural exchanges pointed to the fact that African students were living, moving proof of diplomatic ties, and this powerful concept was quickly transferred over to the individual students themselves who, despite their shockingly brutal awareness of the web of power they were enmeshed in, were often imagined by their teachers as having little access to food, money, and other resources in their home countries. Apparently, despite their radical steps towards individual mobility (corporeal and otherwise), it was inevitably the broader scope of the relationship between China and Africa that took center stage in media depictions of these encounters, which emphasized the fact that China had

enabled the possibility for mobility on many different levels in and for Africa, and its various nation-state's citizens.

Moving well beyond China's infrastructural development within numerous African borders, cultural exchanges in *zájì* mirrored that aid as they carved out corporeal roads and pathways aimed at so-called cultural development in and of the African bodies that were training in *zájì*. The implication was that the ties between China and Africa were so deep that they could be enacted and located within the living bodily tissue of individual flesh, as China gifted its African exchange students with corporeal development in the distinctly Chinese, highly skilled discipline of *zájì*. In these instances, the body became the locus of culture, and yet at the same time, it was much more than just an example of a state's power to drive cultural allegiance into receptive bodies on an international level of embodied cultural transmission. Yes, the principle of cross-pollinating cultural development was at work here. That said, it would still be a mistake to view these acrobatics exchanges simply as political development tools that saw a China that envisioned itself as helping to corporeally mine the resources of 'disadvantageous' African students whose powerful bodies held the promise of great acrobatic development buried deep inside the molecules of their unchannelled flesh. Quite literally during the exchanges bodies were being shaped and moulded, their movements influenced and refined, their vocabularies enhanced and broadened by the post-1949 "scientific" and "developed" institutional form of Chinese *zájì* (Fu 1985; Li 1999), but *not necessarily in the ways the exchanges intended them to be*.

The story of the Habesha Jugglers reveals that the broader political framework of the exchanges cannot be directly analytically imposed upon the bodies involved in them

when that tale is told from an anthropological perspective. This is the case because, rather than the culturally transformative roads of the flesh that were intended by the organizing bodies of the China-Ethiopia cultural exchanges, the corporeal pathways laid down for the Habesha Jugglers in China led the them and other participants to greater possibilities for movement and mobility within a broader international circus market. China-Africa relations, and the acrobatic cultural exchanges they engendered, opened up new global spaces on the ground and led to the possibility for new forms of hybrid identity play amongst the international exchange students. The fact was, that the Habesha Jugglers and other Ethiopian circus performers in China wound up being transformed, and transforming themselves, in very surprising ways during their time in China; ways in which saw them act as active agents in increasing their own corporeal mobilities through building, and exercising, a practice of disciplinary flexibility that would eventually take them around the world. Yet it is imperative for us to remember that this newfound freedom and mobility seemed to be consistently tempered by the fact of having to navigate racial and cultural stereotypes and constraints wherever they went, and within an industry that ambiguously preys on radical notions of difference and bodily anomaly is its most valuable global product.

Corporeality in a Global World

Although it is my basic aim to make a unique contribution to the anthropology of circus by presenting the Habesha Jugglers' story in this thesis, it is also imperative to draw attention to the range of other anthropological areas to which this research can, and does, speak. Chinese/African relations, Africa diaspora identities, an analysis of diverse forms of racism, knowledge transmission and person-centred ethnography are all analytical veins that the Habesha Jugglers' journey resonates with. They are also

prime theoretical locations where notions of culture, the body, and politics intersect around the problems of hierarchy and inequality on a global scale.

I have already discussed China/Africa relations as part of the broader political context for this ethnography. I have also introduced the diverse forms of racism that the Habesha Jugglers encountered within a transnational context.[13] I have not yet discussed a person-centred ethnographic approach, but I will succinctly say that, although it is certainly hinted at throughout the telling of the Habesha Jugglers' story, this ethnography differs significantly from work by scholars such as Herdt & Stoller (1999) and Crapanzano (1980). The Habesha Jugglers' story, although personal indeed, does not focus so much on the individual interlocutors' experiential meanings as part of a broader psychoanalytical approach to anthropology. Rather it explores intimately those meanings in an attempt to capture where and when they intersect (and where and when they don't) with other's experiences and perceptions across international spaces and amongst highly diverse groups of people. Moving forward, I will briefly address the subjects of knowledge transmission, and diaspora identities as they pertain to the heart of this thesis.

Knowledge transmission is especially pertinent to the Habesha Jugglers as it relates to the production of the body and self through extreme corporeal practices. Within the context of training the body in China, much previous academic work has envisioned a docile body (Foucault 1979: 179-187) that has been appropriated as a quasi post-socialist project to further the agenda of the Chinese state (Brownell 1995: 155-179; Morris 2004); a cultural body constructed out of the notions of Confucian ideals; and

[13] Which will be expanded upon, especially in chapters one, five and six of the thesis.

a disciplined body that has been taught by power to relish in the process of his own techniques of self-subjectification. On some level, training acrobatics in China does call for "unlimited patience, complete tolerance of monotony, (and) the continuous ability to work" (Weber 1920-21: 39); it is a warm corporeal embrace of the Confucian belief that man is, indeed, perfectible by self-effort (Weber 1968; Tu 1978: 195; Zito 1993). One could argue that, as a microcosmic, full-blooded, kinship institution, the acrobatic training hall is a world where submitting to gruelling corporeal practices becomes the ultimate paternalistic gesture of respect towards one's Master (Weber 1920-21: 43).

In the process of training in China, family members adjust to their assigned roles within the genderized hierarchy of acrobatic tasks. However, amongst the African exchange students, the embodied discourses of Chinese nationalism and Confucian ideals that were supposedly being inculcated into their foreign flesh were also simultaneously transformed. A truly transcendental and hybrid form of habitus[14] was produced that was much like the embodied institution of circus, "having absorbed and

[14] Habitus is a term originally coined by Marcel Mauss, and later expanded upon in the work of Norbert Elias (Mauss 1979; Elias 1991). It is most often associated with the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1990), and was infamously defined by him as, "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perception, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks… and an *objective event* which exerts its action of conditional stimulation calling for or demanding a determinate response, only on those who are disposed to constitute it as such because they are endowed with a determinate type of dispositions" (Bourdieu 1977: 82-83, emphasis in the original). Importantly, habitus is deeply connected with power. For Bourdieu, an individual's habitus is the central axis through which domination and symbolic violence is legitimated and, hence, the locus point for his "doxic[14] adherence to the world" (ibid.). habitus (i.e. the very mysterious 'misty' depths of the body) simply (if that's possible!) as the nexus for the replication of symbolic domination, or power. Bourdieu introduced the power-laden habitus to the element of time and supposedly opened up "the act of reproduction to indeterminacy and the potential for change" (McNay 1999: 104; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 129). Reminiscent of Bakhtin's utterance, habitus, claimed Bourdieu, is consistently mediated by the elements of 'freedom' and 'constraint' (ibid.); a so-called "open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 133). Agency, in this context, "emerges from a temporalized concept of the body" matched with the "imposition of limits upon the body which simultaneously constitute the condition of possibility" of its transcending the present moment (McNay 1999: 105-106).

adapted numerous cultural and historical traditions, (had) proved open to widely differing ideological inflections" (Stoddart 2000: 85).

Aihwa Ong's innovative case for the ways in which power (and specifically bio-power) operates through the application of techniques of governmentality in the processes of producing new forms of citizenship amongst Cambodian refugees in the U.S. (Ong 2003), is called to mind in the case of knowledge production amongst the Habesha Jugglers. In the same vein as Ong's refugees, the Habesha Jugglers were not simply the passive recipients of the political-cultural bodily knowledge imparted upon them during the China exchange. It was similar happening to that of the production of flexible, and new forms of citizenships (ibid. 1999; 2003), wherein the Habesha Jugglers were inculcating new, hybrid and flexible extreme forms of habitus.

The Habesha Jugglers were using the "natural forces of their bodies" (Marx 1977: 173) to become entrepreneurs skilled in the art of the cultivation, care for, and management of, their own bodily capital (Wacquant 1995: 66). If we define bodily capital as, "accumulated labour (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated', embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour" (Bourdieu 1986: 241; ibid.), then we can say that their bodies were, "simultaneously (the) means of production, the raw materials (they) and (their) handlers…have to work with and on, the somatised product of (their) past training and extant mode of living" (ibid: 67), which happened in a transnational shift of contexts. Disciplined (or not) by the uncompromising experts of Chinese corporeal ethics, the Habesha Jugglers became living recursive relations that linked their own bodily

labour and capital, closely dependant on one another, together within the unified field of their own bodies (Wacquant 1995: 67) across global space. The hybrid and extreme form of habitus inculcated by the Habesha Jugglers speaks wonders to the surprising and flexible ways in which culture, the body and politics collide in the production of the body and self within drastically shifting global and cultural contexts.

In terms of work generated on the diaspora, the most relevant to our purposes here are African diaspora accounts of football players being traded globally,[15] as well as this provocative discussion centred around the diaspora and embodiment amongst Tongan rugby players in Japan. Niko Besnier asks the following questions, which are deserving of our attention in regards to the global world of spectacle, particularly in the case of the Habesha Jugglers. They bear repeating in full here:

> What happens, one may ask more specifically, when the body's configuration and practices are held in high regard in a transnational field of valuation, such as the rules of a particular sport, but are transposed to different contexts in which social and cultural value assignment can vary greatly and, with it, the consumption and commodification potentials of bodies? How do the strength and vitality of bodies become the key to migrating under relatively privileged circumstances when those qualities are also deeply vulnerable and ephemeral, raising the spectre of failure and disappointment? How does the body serve as a medium through which agents engage with large-scale structures and processes, offered for commodification in a field potentially replete with contradictory standards and shifting expectations? These questions come to the fore in a particularly compelling way in the global circulation of professional athletes, a phenomenon of increasing importance at this historical juncture, in which the body is the main vehicle for subjective action (Besnier 2012: 494).

The Habesha Jugglers were not athletes per say, nor does the global circus industry run in direct parallel to that of the Rugby (or other sports) industries. Besnier's point is nonetheless not lost on the subject of this ethnography. His own inquiry seeks to

[15] See, for example, work by Poli (2006), Bale & Maguire (1994) and Maguire (1999).

locate the encounter of objective and subjective experience within the bodies of Tongan rugby players, as they inhabit a larger global field of sport. This field, Besnier claims, has "become the subject of a veritable explosion of scholarly work, although mostly from a top-down historical, macrosociological, and demographic approach [Bale and Maguire 1994; Maguire 1999; Miller et al. 2001]" (2012: 504). He acknowledges that "sports value and commodify certain body configurations in ways that are tied to a global system of rules and expectations" but draws attention to the fact that "*these bodies must also operate and be read within the context of everyday life*" (2012: 505, emphasis mine). Similarly, in their treatment of sports and migration, Maguire and Falcous call for inquiry into the reasons *why* "'professional' athletes become labour migrants" and ask, "how is this process contoured and shaped and what do they experience along their journey?" (2011: 1). Although I would argue against a hasty categorization of Ethiopian circus performers as 'labour migrants', I embrace the spirit of this particular scholarship on migration and sports. Its attempts to reorient questions about current global systems that are actively participating in the commodification of highly trained and valuable bodies within the realm of the experiential on-the-ground corporeal are much needed. Along similar lines, I envision the Habesha Jugglers' story as a provocative way of questioning the type of further studies that would be most conducive to the ways that circus performers experience their lives within a global industry in this day and age.

The Set Up

When I began my multi-sited fieldwork in China in January of 2007, I wanted to explore this untapped question of 'why a circus performer does what she/he does' by training in the skill of foot juggling in China for six months, and then following a

Chinese troupe on tour abroad for another six-month period. This intended approach was informed by my own prior tryst with Chinese-influenced circus training in the U.S.,[16] and embraced a carnally driven angle of *observant participation* (Wacquant 2004) as its main methodological jumping off point. Bubbling just under the surface of my ethnographic naivety, however, was a host of assumptions about the question at hand that had informed my unconscious belief that this preferred methodological approach was a viable one. Based on my own past experiences, I imagined that after partaking in the 'locally' situated Chinese training, I would traipse off with a fancy European circus and prove to anthropology that the circus was indeed a liberating and freedom-inducing way of life for anyone that became a part of it, no matter who they were, or where they had come from. That is not what happened.

As it tends to do for aspiring anthropologists, the field revealed itself to me in moment-to-moment bouts of inspiration and frustration that ultimately led to a place that, although previously unimaginable, was of deeper academic significance to studies of how identity formation, racism, labour and the body may intersect (Gilroy 1987; Hall 1997, 2000; Bhabha 1994). During the first two months of my research in China, I spent roughly on average four hours each day lying on my back staring up at the rotations of blue Chinese flowers stencilled on a large white jar as I tried to run, spin, and toss it in the air with my feet. It wasn't as easy as I had expected. Not that I thought that it would actually be easy – only that it would be challenging in more of an enjoyable kind of way. More like the fun manner that the training I had undergone

[16] I trained for three years at San Francisco's Circus Center (aerial rope, and partner acrobatics). It should be noted that the Artistic Director and several of the primary teachers employed by the Circus Center were from Nanjing, China. On top of serving as the catalyst for where I decided to conduct my fieldwork, this dramatically influenced the type of training that the school offered, and the approach of many of the students to the physical practice of acrobatics. See work on the Nanjing Project in Australia by R. Farrell (2007) for a thorough and helpful account of this kind of training hybridity in a somewhat parallel situation.

in the United States had been: challenging, where you were sweating, pushing yourself, digging deep and deeper still in a room full of people who were all doing the same thing. And the people you were surrounded by - many of whom had given up the security of a regular job and a steady income to pursue the ultimate dream of doing the impossible and becoming a circus performer - were people to whom you could look to for inspiration and to rekindle the circus flame if it was ever in danger of flickering out after one too many handstands or pull-ups. In China, as I found myself upside down within the confines of the Méizhōu Acrobatics School, counting the number of times I could spin a large jar with my feet before losing control of it yet again, I wondered where all those people were.

The reality of acrobatics, or *zájì*, in China threw me off guard. Many of the working acrobats I met there had pursued their profession for vastly different reasons than my American friends had. For a large majority of them, becoming a circus performer had originally been the matter of someone else's decision when they were just a few years old, and it had later become their established life, to which any alternative choice would have meant a drastic cut in wages, accompanied by a loss of security on several levels. To make such a decision in a country that had to successfully support the largest population on earth didn't seem like such a wise one to say the least. That is not to say that every acrobat I met in China had been forced into the trade. Some of them really did love it, and desired to be performers. And certainly within the younger generation of students studying *zájì,* there was a large percentage that had chosen to take part in the training of their own accord. Nonetheless, in the midst of a very different world of intentions, goals, and circus dreams than the ones I had been accustomed to, I found myself struggling with my own training to such an extent that

I was truly perplexed, often imagining that I was experiencing a type of frustration that would never have been a part of circus training in the U.S. (or in the U.K., or Europe, for that matter), despite the fact that some of my teachers in the U.S. were from China. And then, right at that moment, I began to meet foreign circus performers who shared similar feelings of struggle about training in China. Interestingly enough, they also came from far away, but in this case it was Africa, and not the U.S. that they called 'home'.

The African students I met in China were from three different countries and were all there as part of a government sponsored cultural exchange program in acrobatics. I spent time with all of them in China, but it would later be the group of six Ethiopian Habesha Jugglers whom I would follow to Europe and beyond. Over time, and as I got to know the African students better, I became more and more fascinated with how various groups of people from vastly different places – from China, Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, and America - could have such an incredibly nuanced range of responses to what was basically one style of acrobatic training.[17] Even more interesting, though, was the product that these culturally informed corporeal, linguistic, emotional, and mental responses to training acrobatics in China, formed: a nexus of intersecting beliefs – their own and others - about who the students were, why they were in China, what it was that they were supposed to be doing while they were there, and what the ultimate goal of the exchange was. These were the discursive flows of overlapping and, at times, conflicting ideas, that tilled the anthropological soil and let me bear

[17] I am well aware that, anthropologically speaking, this is a problematic and generalized statement to make. There were certainly variations in *zájì* training from troupe to troupe, and from teacher to teacher, but the post-1949 government initiated institutionalization of the discipline of acrobatics created a very uniform and consistent approach overall. The fact that most of the foreign students I'm referring to were training at the same school, and at least in the same region (with the Sudanese being the only group in another, neighbouring, region) means the consistency of the training styles was not so much a pertinent issue.

witness to a collision of differing (and not necessarily compatible) notions about what 'circus' was, or wasn't, supposed to be doing for the people who lived it.

My positioning in the field in relationship to the various groups of interlocutors I had in China became of the utmost relevance in regards to the above question. The fact that I was a foreigner who had trained in circus skills immediately gave me something in common with the African students I met on the exchanges. On the one hand, I was not a native in China. I was not the 'Other' in that sense. Accordingly, I was able to empathize with many of their frustrations of being an outsider in that situation, and, even more so, training in that context. However, on the other hand there were certain things that I could not understand, but that nonetheless struck me most immediately. I am speaking to one thing in particular: the overt racism the African students experienced in China (and later on in Europe). I was shocked when I began to see how much racism was a part of the Habesha Jugglers' daily lives in Huáxīng because, as a 'circus person' myself, I had not yet borne witness to that side of the circus business. That was mostly the case because I am a 'white' American, and all of my prior circus experience had taken place in the U.S. and Europe. In other words, I have never, nor will I ever, experience racism and the subsequent violence it engenders the way that they did, and do. Even while training in China, where the Habesha Jugglers were called "Africans," or "Africa," or sometimes "black people" in Mandarin rather than by their individual names, yet nobody had referred to me as "America" or "the American" at any point. Nor did they call me "white". They called me by my English name, or by the Chinese name I had been given on the day I arrived in the country. Sometimes I was called a "foreigner," (but even this was a fairly rare occurrence). So I discovered quickly in China that this question of what 'circus' was or wasn't, for its

practitioners was indeed a question of relativity (Stoddart 2000). This hypothesis was confirmed as I later followed the Habesha Jugglers from China, across Europe, and back to Ethiopia.

The Players and the Stage

To get down to the nitty-gritty of logistic details, the duration of my fieldwork consisted of six months in China (Luòyáng, Huáxīng, and Shànyì, in the Méizhōu and Guìxī provinces), three months in Europe (moving around Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy while accompanying the Habesha Jugglers on tour with Circus of Africa), and three months in Ethiopia. Although I followed the Habesha Jugglers across time and space, throughout my research I met and spent extensive periods of time with a considerable number of people who worked on various levels within the genres of circus and acrobatics. During the first leg of my fieldwork in China, at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics in the village of Huáxīng (Méizhōu province) my interlocutors included: the Habesha Jugglers (ranging in age from 17-23), and Kenyan participants (ranging in age from 13-17) in the China-Africa cultural exchanges, and Dōng Lǎoshī, the teacher for the foreigners at the Huáxīng school. At the Méizhōu Acrobatics Troupe and Acrobatics School in the city of Luòyáng (Méizhōu province) I had the company of the following players: the members, teachers, and leaders of the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán (Méizhōu Acrobatics Troupe) including Qiǎo (a key interlocutor, retired acrobat, and underground acrobatics agent), and my foot juggling teacher Shān Lǎoshī. At the amusement park better known as Blue Lightning Magic Land on the outskirts of the small city of Shànyì (Guìxī province) my contacts were: the members and teachers of the Shànyì Centre of Acrobatics, the Sudanese acrobats (ranging in age from 9-13), the Sudanese and Chinese teachers of the Sudanese children, and the

leaders and administrative staff of the acrobatic troupe in Shànyì. Throughout the course of my fieldwork in China, I also interviewed a prominent Chinese agent who worked in the field of international performance, an Artistic Director from Cirque Celeste who was working with some of the Méizhōu troupe's members on an upcoming Cirque Celeste production in Asia, numerous local journalists who were doing stories on the acrobatic exchanges with Africa, several lay person friends of Chinese acrobats, and Nelson, the proprietor of Circus of Africa.

The second leg of my fieldwork found me accompanying the Habesha Jugglers on a European tour with Nelson's Circus of Africa. As we wound our way through Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy on tour buses, I was privileged to share time and space with the following players in the peripatetic field: the Habesha Jugglers, the other 30-40 multi-talented performers in the show (singers, dancers, musicians, and circus artists from Ethiopia, Tanzania, the Ivory Coast, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Kenya), Nelson and Tsetseg (his girlfriend, a retired contortionist from Mongolia), a small group of under ten German technicians/crew, a well-known Tanzanian promoter, local European promoters, Jürgen who was the German co-producer of the show, European journalists and photographers who were writing and snapping pieces on the show, and the production's Tanzanian costumer. During the last part of fieldwork in Ethiopia, I kept my anthropological attention focused on the Habesha Jugglers, and the core members of CircusSinia, some of who were in Circus of Africa.

Methodology

Whilst getting to know all the players in the field, I took on numerous roles and utilized different ethnographic methods at different times, depending on where I was

and whom I was with. Like all anthropologists, I relied heavily on participant observation through the entirety of my research in the field. For the first few months in China, I lived on my own in a Peking Opera compound in Luòyáng, and spent the mornings training foot juggling under the tutelage of my extremely short teacher, Shān Lǎoshī, at the Méizhōu Acrobatics School. In the afternoons, I moved over to the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán where I observed the members of the troupe practice. I also often conducted both semi-structured and informal interviews during this time of the day.[18] My nights, however, were usually spent accompanying Qiǎo, the Méizhōu acrobatics teacher and troupe member who worked illegally on the side as an acrobatics agent. She would take me along with whatever troupe she had booked, as they performed their acts in two, three, or even four venues per night. Similarly, I made a few trips to the nearby village of Huáxīng with Qiǎo as she scouted new acts. That is where I first met the African exchange students.

After I was introduced to the Habesha Jugglers and the Kenyan students, I started taking periodic weekend trips on my own in order to spend more time with them. Our time usually consisted of informal interviews, photographing (something I was rarely permitted to do with the Chinese acrobatics students), and a lot of general hanging out. Through their word of mouth, I came to know about the Sudanese acrobats in Shànyì, and after the Habesha Jugglers left for Europe, I moved down to Shànyì and in with the Sudanese. I spent three months living with the group, and methodological life with them consisted of – now keep in mind that they were young children - a lot of running around, playing in the fountain, eating popsicles, watching training and

[18] During the semi-structured interviews, I usually had a translator present (Qiǎo very helpfully volunteered her services). At other times, and during the informal interviews, I was on my own, communicating as best I could with one and a half years of Mandarin classes under my belt.

performances, some attempted spotting[19] on my part (much to the chagrin of their Chinese teachers), photographing, picking and eating under-ripe nectarines, interviewing (semi-structured and informal), playing Super Mario Brothers, buying and distributing various forms of medicine, and acting as a go between for Nelson when he was interested in contracting them to perform in Europe.

After I left China, and met up with the Habesha Jugglers in Germany, my research methodologies shifted in some very interesting ways. Having become acquainted with Nelson over the phone in China, he very generously took me on tour with them to help out with my research. Very soon that turned into having me help him do PR writing, drafting proposals for future shows, and photographing the show nightly. Several weeks in, he also hired me to film and interview performers for a Tanzanian TV documentary that was to promote his upcoming circus in Dar es Salaam. I was also faithfully participating in the daily classes for the dancers in the show. Of course, I was still conducting semi-structured and informal interviews, and doing a whole lot of hanging out with the artists. I became very close with many of the performers very quickly, as one tends to do when living on tour with other people for three months. I can safely say that, even though I initially entered the travelling European circus space as a PhD researcher who utilized participant observation to the utmost, by the end of the tour I was primarily known amongst my companions as a photographer, cameraperson, and an essential part of the tour. After the Habesha Jugglers returned to Ethiopia, I followed suit and my methodological inclinations got simpler. I conducted far fewer semi-structured interviews, and conversations were almost strictly informal at that point due to how well I knew most of the players. This late into fieldwork, I

[19] Offering physical support to dangerous and/or challenging actions.

relied primarily on participant observation, and, to a lesser extent, photography to get the job done.

Ethics

In line with ethical standards, and although many of my key interlocutors (including all of the Habesha Jugglers) encouraged me to use their real names, I have changed all individual, group, and company names of people that I met in the field.[20] I have also avoided disclosing precise individual ages, and instead have provided a general age range when that information is pertinent. Details regarding specific geographic locations have been left out, or disguised when possible, except when referring to countries and large capital cities. That said, due to the nature of the particulars of these cultural exchange programs, the specific global encounters that were a part of my field in its totality, as well as the intimacy of the circus business (even internationally), it would be truly impossible for me to ensure total protection of all group and company identities. To change my interlocutors' nationalities, for instance, would put the ethnography so out of context that it would lose substantial anthropological relevance. In these circumstances, I have done my best to ensure that individuals are protected as much as possible within the broader picture of the field.

Another relevant point regarding ethical considerations has to do with the physical discipline that was part of the acrobatic training in China, and which I discuss in the first half of the thesis. Since my initial entry into the field, how to deal with this troubling question has posed a real dilemma for me. Part of the reason I gravitated so much towards other foreigners at first was due to the fact that I was witnessing a

[20] This does not pertain to detailed information in the thesis introduction that is part of the literature review.

significant amount of violence in the training of one particular group of Chinese boys. After some weeks, their teachers at the training hall started telling me that it wasn't okay for me to write about what I was seeing. They insisted on it. However, I was at a loss for how to write about acrobatic training in China at all if I left that part out. When my central focus switched over to the foreigners on the exchange, part of me felt relieved that I no longer had to think about how to deal with that problem. However, when I moved in with the Sudanese group of performers, I saw that it was part of their training regimen as well. Again, after some weeks of living with them, their Chinese teachers let me know that I could not write about that part of training either. So it is with great transparency about the fact that Chinese teachers told me not to write about physical discipline and violence in acrobatic training that I have, with equally great trepidation, made the decision that it was something that I could not leave out if I wanted to tell the Habesha Jugglers' story in a way that was anthropologically relevant and important. Despite my unease with that reality, it is a decision that I stand solidly behind.

The Story on the Page

The structure of the thesis can be broken down as follows: the first three chapters of the ethnography are set in China, and each of those chapters deals in a different way with how the African students on cultural exchange navigated through a Chinese acrobatics corporeal training regime within a cultural context where they had to deal with racism on a daily basis. Chapter one, 'The School', begins exactly where I met the Habesha Jugglers at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics in Méizhōu, and develops the significant factors of their experience there, including where it was taking them. In chapter two, 'The Training', I explore acrobatic training processes for Chinese

performers in order to create a juxtaposition that will better help to disambiguate the elements of *zájì* practice that were incompatible with the Habesha Jugglers' (and other African circus performers') varying receptivities as foreign students in China. 'The Children' is the third chapter in the thesis, and it explores the alternative ethnographic context of the Sudanese children on *zájì* exchange by looking at how beliefs about their trainability, as well as their receptivity to the training, differed from both the other African circus performers on cultural exchange, and the younger Chinese students who were training in *zájì* in China. It also introduces Nelson to the story, as he attempts to pursue a project of creating an "all-Sudanese circus" to bring to Europe.

Chapter four of the thesis, 'The Agents', is not set in one specific geographic location. As the midpoint, and the middle chapter in the Habesha Jugglers' story, it is an ethnographic bridge between the two halves of the dissertation in which I present three case studies of circus middlemen and women (including Nelson) - the invisible forces behind circus performers – that my interlocutors engaged with while I was in the field. In this median chapter I begin to tease out the primacy of the role of the circus agent, and the imbalances of power the relationship between the agents and circus performers entails, in what is ultimately a search for economic gain in a spectacular playing field where the "market decides" who profits and how.

In the second half of the thesis, chapters 5-7, the ethnography moves onto the Circus of Africa tour in Europe. Chapter five, 'The Show', deals within the onstage elements of the production, and is informed by the broader global political economy of circus. In the chapter I present ethnographic vignettes designed to focus on how the growing

market desire in Europe for ‘African’ circus influenced processes of ‘Africanizing’ the people, props, sounds, and objects in the show that were made at the impetus of Nelson as the circus’ proprietor. I reveal how Circus of Africa’s performers often ambivalently colluded in showcasing these stereotypical representations on stage, as well as how they deeply depended on circus proprietors such as Nelson in order to further their careers. In the following chapter, chapter six, ‘The Tour’, I begin to explore the ‘behind the scenes’ life of Circus of Africa, particularly how it related to the relationship between the African artists and the German production crew. The positioning of the Habesha Jugglers and other African performers on tour mimicked their positioning in Huáxīng, and was based upon all too familiar racialized notions of ‘difference’ which were viscerally located, experienced, and articulated, and which we first saw in China. In the last chapter of the thesis, ‘The Work’, I continue an ethnographic exploration of ‘back stage’ life on the Circus of Africa tour, but this time in relation to the importance of bodily ‘work’ during “African Fever”, and in respect to the process of my interlocutors trying to build better lives for themselves in the long run.

After having wrapped up the thick ethnographic story of the Habesha Jugglers, finally I present the conclusion, ‘The End’ in two parts: the first part, or ‘Afterward,’ gives a synopsis of what happened to the Habesha Jugglers after the Circus of Africa tour ended, which eventually led to the disbanding of their group for good. The second part of the conclusion situates the ethnography of the thesis theoretically within a loose framework of what it means to be an Ethiopian circus performer in shifting global contexts during a time of “African Fever.” I articulate how the Habesha Jugglers and other African performers negotiated their complex hybrid cultural

identities in the face of racism across time and space during their pursuit of a better life in the future by engaging in a deep commitment to all consuming bodily labour in the present.

CHAPTER ONE

The School

Introduction: An 'African' Circus Village in China

Huáxīng is a small village in the north east of China. It is known throughout the country as the 'home of acrobatics'. The Huáxīng School of Acrobatics lies on the outskirts of the dusty lonely village it's named after, side by side with Huáxīng's seemingly abandoned, yet nonetheless well-known, 'Huáxīng Circus Land', a small theme park that holds circus and magic shows in the vein of the pre-Mao old style outdoor performance that was typical of Chinese circus at that time. The school has been recently renovated, and is a large acrobatics training facility that has been hosting the majority of foreign students who have come to China on acrobatics cultural exchange over the past several years. During the time of my fieldwork, the school was in the midst of its fourth year playing host, and up until that point, its guests[21] had come solely from African countries.

In the first year of the school's participation in the cultural exchange program, the school hosted six students from Tanzania. The second year they hosted six from Kenya and six from Ghana. The third year they hosted six from Tanzania, six from Kenya, and six from Ethiopia. Five of the Kenyans, and the six Ethiopians from the

[21] I am referring to those students who had come as part of an official cultural exchange program. The school also took on foreign students who came of their own volition. As well as personally knowing two Americans and one Tanzanian who had trained at the school on their own, I was also told of Korean and Ethiopian students (including three directors from different Ethiopian circuses) who fell under the category of 'free agents'.

third year carried on for another year during the fourth year of the school's cultural exchange involvement, and were joined by six more Ethiopians (The Habesha Jugglers) and six Kenyans. After the 2006 China Africa Forum in Běijīng (where the African students who were there at the time performed dance and acrobatics), the third year Ethiopians and Kenyans left China, while their fourth year counterparts continued on to finish out the remainder of their exchange program.[22] Around the time that I completed the China leg of my research, the fifth year of exchange students were set to come from Ghana, Kenya, Comoros, and Venezuela to study acrobatics at the school.

Several weeks after arriving in China, I took a trip to the school with Qiǎo, a good friend, key interlocutor, ex-acrobat, acrobatics teacher, member of the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán, and underground acrobatics agent, and Shān Lǎoshī, my foot juggling teacher, and self-appointed personal security guard. The purpose of the trip was twofold: first, I wanted to have an introduction to the African students who were training there, and second, Qiǎo was interested in having a look at their acts with the hopes of bringing some of them to Luòyáng to perform. After reaching Huáxīng by train, we stopped by our hotel for a few minutes, before finally heading off for the school.

In order to reach the gates that sealed off the new and slightly ominous compound from the rest of the world, we made our way by taxi down a dirt road, passing several empty fields and crumbly rock walls, until we arrived at our hidden destination. The three of us popped out of the car, ready for business, but no matter how much we tried to convince him, the stubborn guard who occupied the security booth wouldn't budge

[22] All of this information was according to Dōng Lǎoshī, one of the foreign students' teachers in Huáxīng. It does not corroborate in its totality with the information I received from the Ministry of Culture in Běijīng, some of which I also know to be inaccurate.

to let us in. This seemed to embarrass a proud Shān Lǎoshī, and I remembered clearly how when, on a previous trip to China he had brought me and a few circus performer friends of mine to the school for a visit, we had been met with the same unwelcoming hospitality from the same impressive guardian of the gates. But despite the familiar blue-uniformed obstacle that stood before us, after a quick phone call placed by Shān Lǎoshī, we were in.

We passed through the entry and as we walked towards the looming grey building reserved especially for foreign students, three African circus performers came out and strolled toward the gate. Shān Lǎoshī gave them an energetic "*Nǐ hǎo!*" (Hello) and asked if they were training. Affirmative. We continued our walk towards the 'Foreign Students Hall', where everything seemed utterly deserted. The three of us turned corners, examined abandoned corridors, and then went to the second floor where we finally heard faint music pumping in the background. We followed it, and I noticed that an African student in a hat was following us. The rap music started to get louder. I kept turning around, meeting the man's gaze, knowing instinctively that I really wanted to talk to him. We approached the door to the main training area and, as Shān Lǎoshī swung it open, I got goose bumps.

The music was blasting, and two young men were club juggling alongside a foot-juggling girl. There were no teachers in sight, and the feeling in the room was much different from anything I had encountered so far in China, which was, in contrast so intense and serious.[23] I was immediately at ease, and felt very much in my element. The man who had been following us came in behind, and was followed by a Chinese

[23] See chapter two.

teacher who I faintly remembered from my first visit to the school. Shān Lǎoshī introduced me to the man, Dōng Lǎoshī, then explained who I was (first and foremost his student, and second, a researcher), and told him that I knew Luca and Penny, two American circus performers who had trained at the school for three months in 2004. Shān Lǎoshī explained to him that I wanted to talk to the "*Fēizhōu rén*" (Africans); that's how they were known there – as 'Africans', not as Ethiopians, or as Kenyans, and sometimes not even by their own names.[24] Oftentimes, I would come to find out, the Habesha Jugglers were simply called "*Fēizhōu*" (Africa) by their teachers at the school, regardless of whether or not the teachers were aware of their individual names. As the man who was following us began exiting the room, Dōng Lǎoshī called him back over, and, in choppy English, asked him to talk with me. His name was Ras. The two of us walked to the side of the room, and I told him briefly what I was doing. We started to talk, but our conversation seemed to start somewhere in the middle; it was as if we had already known each other for years, and we jumped head first into dialogue.

The dialogue that started between Ras and myself that day touched on the following subjects: discussions about the groups' circus experiences, their cultural exchange, circus practice, dreams, hopes, fears, disappointments, and struggles. This dialogue continued over the course of many years, and has led me to many more conversations and situations with Ras, the Habesha Jugglers, other African students on acrobatics exchange in China, the teachers who worked with the Africans at the Huáxīng school, and other significant players that the Habesha Jugglers came into contact with during

[24] The Sudanese group I spent time with in Shànyì was an exception to this. They were called "Sūdān de" (Sudanese), partly because they were the only Africans, and foreigners, to train there under cultural exchange, and partly, I believe, because of other factors that collapsed 'differences', which I describe in chapter three.

their time in China and beyond. Eventually China would lead us all to Europe, and then back to Ethiopia before it took the Habesha Jugglers on their own through Europe again in order to reach what would be their final destination: a large circus based in the United States. But it was at this very nonchalant acrobatics school - the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics – that was hidden in the dusty outskirts of the village it was named after, which is where it all began for them; and so that is where their story, and this ethnography, must first find its feet.

In this chapter I contextualize the encounters I had with the Habesha Jugglers at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics within a series of ethnographic vignettes, and will keep to this form for the rest of the thesis. I explore how the Habesha Jugglers negotiated the strict rules of the school, training methodologies, racialized outside and top down perspectives of 'Africa' and 'Africans' in China (both onstage and off), ethnic and group identities within the exchange, approaches to practicing acrobatics, or *zájì*, connections made between 'working hard' and gaining 'freedom', and the type of leverage the cultural exchange could generate for them in the bigger picture of their lives. This exploration begins to unravel the myriad of ways that the Habesha Jugglers engaged in the process of developing malleable culturally hybrid forms of identity across global space in situations where power laden notions of 'difference' were highly pronounced, and exacerbated by the corporeally-driven practice of training in Chinese acrobatics.

Circus Artists, Gymnasts, and Acrobats in Huáxīng

The Habesha Jugglers were a troupe of six circus performers from Ethiopia: four men and two women, ranging in age from their late teens to their early twenties. Ras was

the oldest, and the "captain" of the troupe. Although he was still young, there was a quality of an 'old man' about him, which sometimes made him seem wise and profound, and at other times achingly sad and resigned. Ras had been ready to give up circus in Ethiopia at the time he was selected for the exchange, and when I knew him he often wrestled between following the call of hope generated by the newfound dream of a bigger and better future, which had been reinvigorated by coming to China, and a tiredness so despairing that it became a virtual swamp of sadness that he could not lift himself out of. He wound up earning the nickname of "father" for these (and other) reasons later on when we toured together with Circus of Africa in Europe. Despite the high existential tension that Ras struggled with, the rest of the Habesha Jugglers respected his decision-making abilities, and trusted his capacity to lead them down the road to success. During the exchange in Huáxīng, when each of the African students had to have a "major" (one particular act that they focused on learning), Ras' was a doubles tissu[25] act with one of the two women in their troupe, Maharene. Maharene was Ras' partner in the act, and the Habesha Juggler that I got to know the least. In China, she hadn't yet learned to speak English (this changed by the time we were in Europe), and so our communication during the time I knew her in Huáxīng was limited. What I did know about Maharene was that she consistently dealt with injuries that limited her participation in training and performing. She was also the member of the group who would wind up being emotionally a little bit distanced from everybody else. Hiwot was the other female Habesha Juggler, and the youngest in the group. Her major was antipodism (foot juggling), and while she was in China she learned to juggle a jar, a table, and carpets with her feet. Hiwot was calm and focused, had a good head on her shoulders, and was also stunningly beautiful. By the time I

[25] An aerial apparatus made from an extremely long piece of fabric hung vertically.

met up with them in Europe, one of the other male Habesha Jugglers, Gebre, had become her boyfriend. Gebre was sweet, gentle, and giggled often. He was also, hands down, the most talented circus performer in their group. However much he was a gifted flyer, though, Gebre experienced health problems in Huáxīng that led to his major being limited to magic, rather than the more corporeally demanding acts he naturally excelled at. The last two Habesha Jugglers were Melaku and Abebe. Melaku was an energetic, charismatic beautiful young man who had thrived in music performance as much as he had in circus back at his home in central Ethiopia. His major in Huáxīng was slack line, but when I would come to visit them at the school, Melaku seemed to enjoy the practice of conversing about the future, his dreams and his hopes, almost as much (if not more) than he did training his acts. Abebe, on the other hand, was utterly devoted to practicing his jar juggling act. He was a solid and stable man, quietly persistent in the training process. He didn't have the authoritative air that Ras carried himself with, and he was lacking both Melaku's spirited enthusiasm and Gebre's raw explosive talent, but what Abe *did* have would serve him well in the long run; the silent and humble devotion of getting up over and over again in the face of failure, and refusing to be dissuaded in the process no matter how long the road takes, was an essential quality for a successful circus performer to possess.

When I first met the Habesha Jugglers in Huáxīng, they told me that they all dreamed of a future with Cirque Celeste. Even then, Ras knew he wanted to eventually become a circus promoter, and Abe and Gebre both vaguely aspired to make themselves into "a famous man." Simultaneously, the group all desired to one day take the corporeal knowledge they were inculcating in China, back to Ethiopia to teach other aspiring circus performers at home so the younger ones wouldn't have to come all the way to

China to study. These were dreams that didn't necessarily directly jive with their current status in Huáxīng, where the group found themselves in the position of participating in a cultural exchange that was supposed to teach them the skills of traditional Chinese acrobatics. They all came from circus backgrounds in Ethiopia, but had been selected by the Gymnastics Association of Ethiopia to participate in the exchange because they had won their respective regional gymnastics championships. The Association hoped to amass a talented and skilled group of gymnasts to get a closer shot at topping the African National Games, or even garnering Olympic glory one day, but, at the very least to become trained enough to teach gymnastics to a new, first, generation back home.

At the time of their selection, the kind of specialist training in gymnastics that was the norm in places such as the United States, Russia, China, Japan, and Europe, was far from commonplace in Ethiopia.[26] So-called gymnasts in Ethiopia frequently came from the main circuses in Ethiopia, and they became gymnastics champions because of their participation in gymnastics competitions that were held regionally. The fact that the Habesha Jugglers were selected by the Gymnastics Association of Ethiopia to further their goals as an organization meant that the Habesha Jugglers were being sent from Ethiopia because of *gymnastics*. But when they got to China, they were training in *acrobatics*. Whereas in Circus of Africa, they were all referred to as *artists*, and eventually in the U.S. with Urban Vibe Circus they would be part of a pool of circus *talent*. Just as "the increasing number of African football players in Europe is explained as much by 'pull' factors (continuing colonial links, the search for 'new markets', the setting up of transfer networks, etc.), as 'push' factors (lack of structure

[26] It is my understanding, through what some of my interlocutors told me, that this was the case, but now it is changing, and places are popping up in Ethiopia where students can train gymnastics as gymnasts.

in African football, football's new status, increased attractiveness due to satellite television, etc.)" (Poli 2006: 394), flexibility terminology in these situations reflected the wide range of push/pull factors involved in generating the acrobatics exchanges amongst Ethiopian circus performers. This was evidenced in the fluctuating, yet nonetheless constant, tension hovering between the path the Habesha Jugglers wanted to pave, which would ideally lead to better lives and upward mobility in their eyes, and the greater networks they had had to navigate (and sometimes just withstand) along the way. For the Gymnastics Association of Ethiopia, the Habesha Jugglers training in China meant that Ethiopia would supposedly benefit from strong competitors in the African Games, a potential shot at Olympic glory, and better specialized teachers to train young Ethiopians in the art of gymnastics back at home. This understanding failed to consider, however, that the implicitly, and culturally, nuanced terms of *acrobatics, circus,* and *gymnastics,* were not somehow interchangeable. What those terms were, was malleable enough in a transnational context to allow the Habesha Jugglers to manoeuvre within the push/pull situation they found themselves in in China during the exchange, which enabled them to work more towards their own personal goals of having international renowned circus careers; goals that, thanks in part to the mash-up of these crucial and central terms, became more of a real possibility in the relatively near future for the group.

Terminological flexibility carried over into practice in China. The group told me that for the first six months in Huáxīng, they spent the majority of their time training club juggling in preparation for the China-Africa Forum in Běijīng.[27] Club juggling was a

[27] The China-Africa Forum was officially called the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The 2006 Forum in Běijīng was the third FOCAC. President Hú Jǐntāo and 35 heads of state of African countries were in attendance. On the African side of things, Běijīng's China-Africa Forum that year

circus skill that Ethiopian circus performers were known to be proficient in, and which the troupe members had already brought over with them from Ethiopia. In other words, it was not part of the *zájì* repertoire. The Habesha Jugglers felt that their ability to perform club juggling was the primary reason the Ministry of Culture in Běijīng invited them to China in the first place. Although they resented this assumption, they still made the most of training *zájì* at the time; what else could they have done, because, as Melaku told me: "We haven't circus power (yet)." While they were there, they also knew that what they were doing was far removed from the plans that the Gymnastics Association of Ethiopia had for them; the African Games, Olympics, and a future in Ethiopia as gymnastics instructors were out of the question for them because, as one of them put it, their "way is changed." For the Habesha Jugglers the cultural exchange in China would be a massive stepping-stone in the direction they wanted their lives to take, and proof in point that they could actually transcend their circumstances; that even in the midst of the tightly controlled space of the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics, they could find a way – their way – "out to freedom," as Ras would eventually say to me one evening in Huáxīng. Finding a way "out to freedom," however, necessarily involved navigating the unfamiliar rules and boundaries they were subjected to at the Huáxīng school.

The Rules

In order to contextualize some of the 'foreign' boundaries the Habesha Jugglers had to negotiate in China, I want to lay out what some of the rules of the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics were and situate them within concrete examples of how they were navigated by the group and other Africans on the acrobatics exchange. The

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was arranged in Addis Ababa, where the Africa United head office was located (its chairman for the year was Ethiopia's president).

admittance letter, sent to each of the Habesha Jugglers when they were selected to participate in the cultural exchange, read as follows:[28]

> It is a pleasure to inform you that you have been admitted to the hua xing acrobatic school for an acrobatic course of 12 months commencing on (registration date), 2006. The following are some important requirements and information relevant to your admission and stay in china.
>
> 1. You are required to take a health check before departing for china, with the medical exam form provided by the Chinese embassy, which certifies that you are healthy and have no communicable diseases. The original copy of the certificate is needed for your registration at the school.
> 2. You are required to comply with the school's regulations and rules, and with the school's arrangements concerning your training and extracurricular activities, throughout the training course.
> 3. The school will bear the following expenses during your stay in china; a. all fees related to the training course. B. food and lodging. C. transport within china as arranged by the school. D. medical insurance while in china. 4. your trip to china is to be paid for by the sending party and your air ticket back home at the end of the training course will be provided by the SCHOOL.
>
> We look forward to receiving you at the hua xing acrobatic art school.
>
> Foreign student management office
>
> (Date), 2006

The second point in the letter about the school's regulations and rules, and the arrangements concerning training and extracurricular activities, indicated that the

[28] This is a precise replication of the letter. Any grammatical, spelling, or just plain old common sense mistakes are included in the original.

Habesha Jugglers would be expected to obey the rules of the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics, but never actually laid out what those rules were. Not really taking the time to get hung up on this little oversight before they arrived in China, because, as Melaku put it to me, the opportunity to leave Ethiopia was rare indeed (so when one got it, he thought: "Only go out… only to come. Only to come [to China]"), the troupe was in for a little bit of a shock when they encountered what was in store for them at the school.

Some examples of the school's regulations that the Habesha Jugglers would be expected to follow included the following: they were to be locked in the school's smallish compound at all times, except for a brief two hour period every other Sunday in which they were able to go out into Huáxīng's village centre. In order to be let out of the compound, they had to show a special permission paper to the guard each time (during the first three months, the school insisted on calling them a taxi to pick them up for their outings, but after three months had passed, they were able to go out on their own instead). They were to train six days per week, all day (until 5:30 pm Monday-Friday, and until 4 pm on Saturdays. Sundays were their days off). They were to clean the training hall before and after training each day. They were to clean the dining area after meals. And they were to survive off of the allocated allowance of 100 RMB[29] per month (this was a substantial increase from the allowance of the first group of Ethiopians who, just one year prior, only received 30 RMB per month);[30] although they were sometimes only paid every three months, and were sometimes paid less because of various cuts made for not following the rules properly. For example, if they refused to perform, train, or clean the training hall, their allowances

[29] At the time that the Habesha Jugglers were in China, the currency exchange rate between Chinese Rénmínbì (RMB) and Ethiopian Birr was virtually 1:1.
[30] According to the Habesha Jugglers.

were cut by 10-50 RMB depending upon the particular incident (e.g. 10 RMB cut for resting without a legitimate reason; 50 RMB cut for refusing to perform). Aside from monthly salaries allotted for living expenses and bi-monthly time away from the school's compound, the structured regiment the Habesha Jugglers were expected to follow was the same as that of the Chinese students. However, they trained, slept, and dined in a separate building from the Chinese acrobats, allocated exclusively for use by foreign students.[31]

I had the opportunity to discuss the foreign exchanges from the Huáxīng school's end of things more in depth with Dōng Lǎoshī during an extensive semi-formal interview. Dōng Lǎoshī had studied acrobatics for three years beginning at the age of nine, before giving it up in pursuit of a more academically oriented path. Many years later, he came full circle and took up a teaching position at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics. He spent a single year teaching Chinese students before switching over to the African students (I assumed because of his ability as a moderately capable English speaker). He had taught acrobatics to foreigners from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania. When I asked him why the foreign students were curiously (to me, anyway) kept so separate from the Chinese students, Dōng Lǎoshī explained that the foreign and Chinese students were simply "different" from one another – that, for example, the Africans couldn't eat the same kind of food as the Chinese students could (i.e., no pork). Why then, I asked, did they have the same rules applied to them if they were so different? Dōng Lǎoshī grappled for a satisfactory answer for several minutes before finally concluding that the rules were only for training, but that life was a different matter altogether.

[31] Both Dōng Lǎoshī and the Habesha Jugglers agreed upon the fact that the African students had better quality accommodation and food than their Chinese counterparts did.

When referring to the African students, Dōng Lǎoshī didn't draw a distinction between those from Ethiopia, and others from, say, Kenya. When I asked him if he found the groups from different African countries to be different from one another in terms of receptivity to his teaching methods, he told me that they were the same because they all spoke English, but then went on to remark that there were minute differences to be found. For example, the Kenyans were young, and the Ethiopians were older, so Dōng Lǎoshī was more confident about being understood by the Ethiopians, whom, he said, he got to know well. Nonetheless, Dōng Lǎoshī readily admitted the difficulties he encountered when teaching African students; difficulties in training them that could be chalked up to life-oriented "cultural differences" that the African students brought with them to China. He told me that teaching the Chinese students was easy, but that teaching the Africans was different, and had "some problems." He emphasized the most important problem as being a "cultural difference," which he responded to by "chang(ing his) mind" so he could "listen to their culture" and discuss things with them. He pointed out that because the Chinese student learned from the time they were children, they were able to listen and follow his instructions with a sense of ease; the African students, however, couldn't, or just wouldn't, always listen and obey. He gave the example of cleaning to illustrate this difference. Every morning and evening before and after training, the training hall needed to be cleaned. The Chinese students did this without fail, and without complaint. The African students, on the other hand, often vocalized their objections, saying things like, "I have come for training, not to clean." On top of occasionally meeting this type of overt resistance from the African students, Dōng Lǎoshī also encountered a sense of humour from them that left him quite baffled. He told me he

didn't "know how to do (sic)" with the African students, whether he should have been "serious or joking," because the Chinese students had always been so "serious" in class.

I had the impression that Dōng Lǎoshī found himself in a somewhat vulnerable position in terms of having to abandon his own cultural understanding of how to teach acrobatics in the face of the unchartered territory of the Africans. Cultivating the kind of relationships that would have 'naturally' developed between Dōng Lǎoshī and his Chinese students, including the practice of strictly enforcing the rules, was simply impossible when it came to the Africans. As a result, the relationship he developed with foreign students was less than that of a teacher to his students, and more along the lines of a tentative mediator that worked between the bureaucratic structures of the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics and the changing influx of linguistically and culturally challenged groups who temporarily graced the corridors of the 'Foreign Students Hall'. At one point, the Habesha Jugglers told me that Dōng Lǎoshī was more like a translator than a teacher. In fact, I never witnessed him actually teaching any of the foreign students at all during my periodic short-term visits to the school; each time I visited Huáxīng, both groups were training on their own. Ras explained that their *zájì* teachers had worked them very vigorously up until they performed at the China-Africa Forum in Běijīng (prior to my arrival in China), at which point the teachers ceased caring about working with them, he said.

In terms of the Habesha Jugglers relating to the spoken and unspoken rules of working as acrobatics students in China, they exercised a mobility of sorts that would not have been acceptable for Chinese students. And that same type of boundary

negotiation was evident in their, and other African students', day-to-day lives at the school, as well as the route the troupe of six took when they finally exited China. For example, when the Habesha Jugglers performed for the China-Africa Forum in Běijīng, they only stayed in the city for a few days. As was the custom for Chinese acrobats who were performing in a foreign country, they would normally have been confined to the spaces of the performance venue and their lodgings; so, logically, the same rule would apply to a foreigner who was performing in China. Given that the group was only ever able to see any of China outside of their school's compound when they performed, the lot of them were excited about exploring a little of Běijīng. Melaku explained to me that they were allowed to leave the grounds of the hotel they were staying at "only by power." In other words, they weren't given permission to go out, and they didn't ask - they just went on their own accord. When he relayed this instance to me, I was told that the Chinese were sometimes afraid of Africans, and so sometimes their teachers and leaders would say something about such a blatant disregard for a rule, and sometimes, out of fear, they wouldn't. Occasionally, depending on the outcome of such an act, as we will see in the following example, the teachers may have even applauded it.

It wasn't only the Habesha Jugglers who found themselves playing with boundaries at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics. One of the Tanzanian performers from Circus of Africa in her late twenties, Jina, had spent a total period of over three years in China studying acrobatics and magic. Jina was part of the first group of Tanzanians who participated in a cultural exchange program at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics from September of 2002 through December of 2003. Having been awarded with the 'best student' honour, the school invited her to come back again as an individual to help

teach the new African students Chinese because Jina excelled at learning the language. She returned to China for one year in February during the mid 2000s, and again in May of the following year. She had also made a shorter visit of about two months after I had left China. The two of us were sitting in the Circus of Africa catering area of a performance venue in Germany when she told me how her magic training had progressed at a more rapid pace than usual. Well into her third period of study in Huáxīng, Jina had spent two months in magic class, and was convinced that the classes were moving too slow for her taste: "I want(ed) to do it fast," she laughed, but the Chinese way emphasized the basics of course. She decided that she was going to start secret classes outside of the school. Every evening Jina would hop the school's fence to go to a magic shop where an old man taught her for very little: she had to pay for the tricks, but not for the instruction. After one month of learning magic in secret, the school held a review in order to evaluate the progress of its students. Jina had tricks that the school didn't teach her, and according to her, she was clearly more advanced at that point than the other students in her class, who were all Chinese.[32] "Look at Jina! She's African, but she performed better than you… how can an African beat you?" her headmaster asked the other Chinese students. After his reaction, Jina decided to confess to him what she had been doing. Because of her progress, rather than reprimand her, the faculty thought that her illicit disobedience in the name of magic was actually valuable. After that, she bought a bicycle, and was openly allowed out of the school during evenings to continue her studies in magic. As it turned out, under certain conditions, transgressing the physical boundary of the Huáxīng School was totally permissible.

[32] Jina spent time with all of the students in Huáxīng, the Africans as well as the Chinese. Jina said, more specifically, that she "lived" with the Africans, but "had classes" with the Chinese. I never heard of any of the other African students training with the Chinese students (but at one point, for several months, Jina was the only foreign student training at the school).

"Learned by Power"

For the African students in China on cultural exchange, navigating school boundaries in Huáxīng went hand-in-hand with navigating the boundaries of their own bodies. Training was one of them. In Chinese acrobatic training, there was a focus on emphasizing the four 'basics': handstand, leg flexibility, waist flexibility and tumbling (Farrell 2007: 128). Students generally spent the first one to three years tediously perfecting these techniques. It was believed that if a student could master the basics, then learning more difficult tricks would come easily when built on such a strong and methodical foundation. Oftentimes, strict physical discipline was incorporated into this early period of learning for young Chinese students. This wasn't the case for the Habesha Jugglers, however. On one occasion I was sitting in the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics with four of the Habesha Jugglers, all of us mounted on big, brightly coloured plastic chairs that were (ironically) chained to the table they surrounded. The five of us were once again talking about Chinese acrobatic training methods. Melaku felt that when the acrobatics teachers beat the children here:[33] "They were teaching by power." Ras agreed: "I imagined (the) Chinese were teaching by technique, but I didn't see any technique. I saw power." Then he said that, acrobatically speaking, the Chinese only knew how to do handstand anyway; implying that much of what their troupe had learned there, they had either known beforehand, or had taught themselves. For example, during their exams, the Habesha Jugglers' tumbling was considered very good. They hadn't learned it in China, however, so when the judges accredited them with having mastered decent skills for their tests, Ras rhetorically asked: "Who (taught) me acrobatics? Don't give me this

[33] Physical discipline was a common element of *zájì* training. I discuss it in chapter two.

point (referring to the exam points that they earned)… don't write." "We are (sic) not learned by power," Melaku defiantly chimed in, but instead, "by interest."

Shortly thereafter, I was walking with the four male Habesha Jugglers down the dust-laden street, eating a fresh piece of pineapple that dangled precariously from a stick. Ras and I strolled side-by-side as he told me that, in Ethiopia, circus came second; work and life were first. People trained, for free, generally not much more than two hours per day.[34] And – this was key here – unlike in China, it was by their own choice. They oftentimes came from poor families; rich Ethiopian families usually sent their kids to school to become doctors, or lawyers, if possible. Circus was Ras' hobby in Ethiopia, he told me; it was never his life. Here, in China, he went on saying, it *is* his life. It had to be; in China, *zájì* always came first. For example, the children in a Chinese state acrobatics school only had 1-2 hours of culture classes per day, and the rest of their time was for training (in a private acrobatics school, the children often didn't have any culture classes. Some of them never learned to read and write). In Ethiopia, circus training came literally after regular school (or before, depending upon whether the student had a morning or afternoon shift of academic classes). He, like many other Africans on the exchange, believed that if Ethiopians trained all day like the Chinese did, they would reach a much higher level, much faster. Then he told me that the young Chinese students at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics tended to cry when their families left them after a brief visit to the school. Many of them said to Ras that they wanted to leave and go home, and that they didn't want to stay at the school anymore.[35] When pressed, he couldn't tell me, given the fact that the young students were so eager to leave, why the kids had even come to the school in the first place.

[34] This wasn't always, or completely, the case, but at the time of this conversation, it was the only information I had on circus training in Ethiopia.
[35] The older ones didn't fall into this category, however.

Compared with the Chinese students, Ras and the Habesha Jugglers were a different case altogether; they knew exactly for what reason they had come to train acrobatics at the Huáxīng School.

"Africans are Dangerous"

"Africans are dangerous," Patrick, one of the Kenyan students on exchange in Huáxīng, told me. We were on his balcony, overlooking the school's empty compound, and talking about the pace in which acrobats from different countries were able to learn new circus tricks. Patrick meant, of course, that Africans could learn acrobatics very quickly, especially when compared to the Chinese, who slowly emphasized mastering the basics in a methodical fashion that progressed over a long span of time, he said. He believed that if an African student and a Chinese student were being taught in the same training hall, by the same teacher, the African student would learn much faster.

This wasn't the first time I had heard such a sentiment. Aside from Ras, Qiǎo also said that in many ways the African "body condition" was better than the Chinese "body condition," and that the quicker reflexes and better coordination of Africans enabled them to study skills such as club juggling, a skill that the Chinese were not known to possess a high level of but Ethiopians were, much more rapidly than the Chinese, who were slow to progress. Qiǎo, however, also believed that Chinese people could study traditional Chinese acrobatics acts, like foot juggling, much faster and with a better final product than African people could. She attributed this to the fact that a lot of acrobatics in China were "Chinese traditional," and that therefore, a Chinese person would 'naturally' understand how to learn them better and quicker.

Maurice, the captain of the Kenyans, said that their group was told by many Chinese at the Huáxīng School, that Africans had "powerful" bodies that were good for acrobatics. He added, in the same sentence, that Chinese people were generally afraid of Africans.

On the balcony, Patrick followed up his comment about Africans being "dangerous" by telling me that when the Kenyans first arrived in Huáxīng, their teachers told them that Africans had different blood (that it was white or green or black), and they were instructed not to talk to or touch the Chinese students at the school. After some time, this restraint was let up, he said, and the group made friends with a number of the children there.[36] Despite the fact that this example of racist behaviour in China was more extreme than other incidents I had heard of, or events I had witnessed first-hand, it was just one of the many tales I was told by the students who were there on exchange. The strict rules of the Huáxīng School that the African students were expected to follow were the same as those for the Chinese students, but in the context of the exchange they were reframed by racist discourses that defined their bodies as "smelly," "ugly," "poor," and "dangerous" by a significant enough portion of the host country's authoritative members they dealt with. Separate sleeping and eating areas, different food, and the well-defined borders of the 'Foreign Students Hall' literally created a safe enough distance between the native students and the "dangerous" Africans, whose "different blood" posed a threat that could be located in the body,

[36] This was the only time I heard about this so-called 'rule'. The Habesha Jugglers told me that the extent of it was that the Chinese students weren't allowed to enter the foreign students' rooms (and would be physically reprimanded if they did, so they would sneak in instead). The Chinese students also had to remain outside of the 'Foreign Students Hall', in general. So whether what Patrick told me was true or not, I will never know. It is somewhat beside the point, though. The relevance lies more in the African students' active deployment of various discourses concerning China and racism.

making the racism generated in response to the "fear" of "dangerous" African bodies (inside and out) a visceral phenomenon indeed.

Circus of Africa's Jina explained things a bit differently to me when we were in Germany. She said that the teachers from the school in Huáxīng treated them well enough, but that the hotel staff where the group stayed for the first three months of their time in China while the 'Foreign Students Hall' was still under construction, treated them badly for an initial one or two months. So did the general population of Huáxīng, she said. Jina inferred from the responses the group often received on the streets, that Chinese people thought, "these Africans, they are poor." People literally ran from them. Or covered their noses when they saw the African students, even if they observed them from a long 'safe' distance. The group started to wonder if the Chinese thought that Africans smelled bad. Even if they *did* smell bad, Jina said to me, the Chinese shouldn't have been able to smell them from so far away. "It was very bad. Sometimes we didn't want to go to town… (even though) we did (want to go)." Jina laughed robustly as she told me that sometimes the behaviour they encountered in public made the group want to get mad, yell at, or even hit their Chinese onlookers. But Jina was quick to tell me that after about four months there, the shock of everything eased up, and she was able to adapt. Overall, Jina felt very positively about her time in China. As we talked during the Circus of Africa tour, it became clear that she was also particularly conscious of the difference between *being in* China, and *reflecting upon* the experience, after-the-fact, and from another continent: "If you are in that school, it's very hard and bad… (but) when you leave, you miss that place." It was the coming back, visiting teachers, and the "being free," that was good.

The blatant anti-African sentiment amongst the general public in China wasn't just something that was relayed to me by the foreign students there; a fair number of my Chinese interlocutors, when questioned on the topic of the acrobatic cultural exchanges, spoke freely about why they didn't like Africans. The justifications I got for this 'cultural aversion' ranged; some interlocutors, like Jina's villagers, believed that Africans smelled bad, or that their black appearance was ugly (i.e. they had big lips); I was also told that Africans were problematically "*bù yīyàng*" (different) from the Chinese; and then I was told, of course, that Africans were dangerous. For example, during a discussion with Liáng Lǎoshī, a teacher at the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán, about my visits to the school in Huáxīng to see the Habesha Jugglers, he asked me if I liked Africans (while miming club juggling movements). I answered him by saying that a good person was a good person anywhere, just as a bad person was a bad person anywhere, and that whether they were African, Chinese, or American, was simply irrelevant. He quickly said that he didn't like Africans because they had a tendency to steal money. He told me a story about being in Las Vegas, and getting robbed of 100 dollars at gunpoint by a group of black men. I told him that, although what happened to him was truly unfortunate, the people who robbed him were American, and not African, so maybe it was Americans and not Africans who had a predisposition for thievery, and maybe it was really Americans who he should be saying he didn't like. He found this quite funny.

Response to China's acrobatic guests wasn't always so blatantly racist. Sometimes Chinese interlocutors placed their discursive attention on the cultural exchanges themselves, championing them as charitable tools that aided and assisted in

developing the raw material of African bodies. Several people referred to the exchanges as "*Zhōngguó bāngzhù Fēizhōu*" (China helps Africa), and one in particular, Cherry (an employee of the Shànyì Centre of Acrobatics),[37] stated that the *"Wénhuà bù"* (Ministry of Culture) gave this form of assistance to the Sudanese acrobats in China because Sudan is very poor and couldn't afford to support its citizens on its own.[38] My teacher, a man who wasn't involved with the exchanges at all, shared this opinion as well.

Shān Lǎoshī was seated at the kitchen table in my Luòyáng flat, talking about African acrobats. Posturing confidently, he told me that the African students in Huáxīng worked really hard, and that they had good *zájì* to show for the fact that they didn't often take "*xiūxí*" (rest). He said that in Africa, these students were poor,[39] and that the conditions here in China were much better for them because the Huáxīng School paid for all of their food, lodging, and expenses. According to Shān Lǎoshī, the Chinese government gave the school 6,000 USD per acrobat. That amounted to a total of about 70,000 USD for 2006/2007 (when I conducted research in China). The money covered all costs, including tuition, food, plane tickets back to Ethiopia, and the 100 RMB/month 'salary' the acrobats were paid. In prior years, the school also paid for their *"dàojù"* (props), but at the time of my fieldwork, that was no longer the case. And all of this because China and Africa were "good friends," Shān Lǎoshī said. He proceeded to tell me that prior to 1963 (when a group of Tanzanians came to

[37] Where the Sudanese performers were training acrobatics.
[38] Unbeknownst to Cherry, as part of the exchange, I was informed by their Sudanese teacher that the Sudanese government gave the families of the children in China a monthly stipend of 50 USD each.
[39] Relatively speaking, and in terms of the Ethiopian economy, the Habesha Jugglers did not come from poor families. They all came from middle class backgrounds.

China to learn acrobatics at the Dōngfāng Zájì Tuán for a three year period),[40] acrobatics didn't even exist in Africa. I asked Shān Lǎoshī about Egypt, an African country that supposedly had as extensive and long-winded an acrobatics history as China does, and he didn't know where Egypt was. He did tell me, though, that China, Russia, Korea, Mongolia, Libya (unaware that Libya was in Africa, I presumed) and Greece all had substantial acrobatics histories. It was China, however, that was now so generously passing down this specialized, and historically situated, form of cultural-bodily knowledge to a so-called acrobatically deprived Africa. And apparently the African students were taking the opportunity and running with it; the fact that they worked hard on training *zájì* was coupled with an inherent natural African performance ability, which meant that their ugliness, the main determinant factor in why Chinese people didn't like Africans, Shān Lǎoshī explained, could be overlooked on the stage.

Working Hard in Huáxīng

Unsavoury stereotypes of dangerous and smelly African bodies drove racist behaviour towards the students on the exchanges, and it also carried over into discourses about the larger scheme of things. In terms of the Chinese media, it meant that China was generously passing along its non-Western developmental traditions – in the cultural, corporeal, and economic senses - to its lagging behind, poorer, African brothers. The exchange went hand-in-hand with the building of roads, bridges, and other forms of construction, along with various types of investment, including tax-free imports and exports, by Chinese workers, for Ethiopia's citizens, the benefits of which could

[40] This information was given to me by Shān Lǎoshī, but wasn't confirmed by the data I secured from the Ministry of Culture in Běijīng. However, because other information that Shān Lǎoshī gave me was (almost without exception) extremely accurate, and because the chart the Ministry drew up for me counted Venezuela as one of the African countries that was participating in the exchanges, I ventured to give Shān Lǎoshī the benefit of the doubt in terms of reliability about the 1963 Dōngfāng exchange.

generally be cited within the country's borders. A slew of articles was published in English language online periodicals in China, highlighting the spectacle of the grateful foreigners who came to China with open arms to adopt the successful, and scientific, methods of China's acrobatic tradition, and who would then carry China's first-rate cultural knowledge back home in order to spread the wealth and knowledge they had acquired abroad.

The presence of reporters at the Huáxīng School was commonplace throughout the exchanges. When I asked the Habesha Jugglers while we were in China if they had opened up the same way in their Chinese interviews as they had done with me (i.e., talking about the many problems that existed for them during their exchange), Ras said they hadn't, because the reporters hadn't asked them the same types of questions that I had been asking them. When they were interviewed by members of the Chinese media they only talked about the good opportunity for performance that the cultural exchange was bringing to them. This lack of an empathetic ear in foreign space had weighed on the troupe as Ras indicated one night. He told me that before I came to Huáxīng, his stomach was like this, and gestured to indicate a big, bloated belly. After talking with me about what their experience had really been like in China, however, his bloated abdomen had metaphorically gone down, he said, and now he could "tell my heart from my stomach."

It wasn't just for the sake of the Chinese media that the Habesha Jugglers were putting on a show, though. When they performed outside of the Huáxīng School, their teachers also treated them differently than they did within the walls of the locked compound. Melaku said that, publicly, they acted proud of their African students

because they were bringing a good name to the school, and accordingly, their Chinese audiences would "imagine Huáxīng is working hard." This public front ran counter to the opinion the Habesha Jugglers held of what their Chinese teachers really thought about Africans; Ras said that they didn't see them as human, and that "they don't care about Africans," which made him feel "very angry every day."

The anger flowed freely from the Habesha Jugglers during the latter part of their stay in China. For instance, I was sitting outside with the Habesha Jugglers one evening at the school in Huáxīng. The sun was setting over the dusty grey horizon, and a chill was in the air. At the time, I imagined that the group was in a doorway, with one foot in and one foot out, preparing for the next step on their journey to Europe, when everything was about to change. I asked them if the experience at the school in Huáxīng had been worth it for them. They all said no, it hadn't. Punctuating this answer with thoughts such as: "China is nothing to me," and "this is a prison." What, if anything, had they learned here so far, I inquired. But rather than tell me about the acts they had developed, or the new tricks they had added to their repertoire, Ras said that he had "learned endurance…. (and) how to survive a thing. How to finish."

Groups

The sense of frustration communicated to me by the isolated African students on exchange in Huáxīng, both intensified the closeness of their groups as 'Africans' as well as by their national identities. For example, I was standing with Melaku, Abebe, and Hiwot by the dust-laden window of the 'Foreign Students Hall'. I asked Hiwot a question about practicing – one that I had already posed to the others - and Melaku quickly interjected, saying, "we are… (all) feeling the same. One person… (to)

interview (out of the troupe is) enough." In China, both the Habesha Jugglers and the Kenyans told me the opinions and feelings they had expressed to me individually were also shared by the other members of their respective groups. Similarly, they often spoke of individual acrobatic skill levels in the voice of the collective. For example, Shaaban, one of the Kenyan students, explained that the Ethiopians were better at acrobatics than the Kenyans, who had no prior experience in acrobatics when they arrived in Huáxīng; but in materials,[41] both groups were on the same level. The first group of Ethiopians helped them advance their skills (particularly club jugging), Shaaban told me, but then complained that problems began developing between the two groups when the Ethiopians started hiding their tricks from them. For all the particulars I witnessed, and heard about, in dealing with the practice of acrobatics in China, it was not surprising that the Habesha Jugglers and other foreign students on exchange in China, had to find their own way to adapt to the training regimens and lifestyle there. Nevertheless, the two groups wound up engaging in an on-going, friendly, and competitive club juggling competition, Ethiopian-style, throughout the duration of their stay in China. After all, as I was told many times by the Habesha Jugglers while we were in China,[42] "Ethiopian circus" was the best in Africa.

At the Huáxīng School there were constant references being made by the African students on exchange as to what differentiated one group from another in terms of acrobatic ability. Allusions as to how slow the Chinese progressed, acrobatically speaking, were contrasted with the belief that if African circus performers spent as much time training as their Chinese counterparts did, they would surpass the Chinese

[41] 'Acrobatics' were, for example, gymnastics and tumbling, whereas 'materials' were acts that made use of physical props (e.g. jar juggling, slack wire, tissu).
[42] Ras told me that when the proprietor of Circus of Africa went scouting for performers, Ethiopia and Sudan were the first places he had looked.

skill level by a long shot. African bodies in this sense became "powerful" and "dangerous" because of their innate ability to "learn fast" and to utilize the capacity for speed that was supposedly inborn. These racial discourses sat in contrast to cultural and national discourses between the Ethiopians and the Kenyans that saw the game of one-upmanship take on the guise of nationalism and the language of cultural superiority as it was played out in the Kenyan's ability to wake up earlier and to "work hard(er)." The Kenyans believed that they ultimately "know how to survive this life" better than the more experienced Ethiopians, who at first helped them out, but then began hiding their tricks from them. In other words, the acrobatic competition between the two groups of Africans was primarily about which group was superior in acrobatic knowledge, "hard work" and practice; which group had the better capacity to exercise "endurance," and eventually "finish" out their time in the "prison" of the *zájì* exchange.

The rhetoric of nationalism that was overtly deployed by the Africans on exchange in Huáxīng made itself right at home in the company of the Chinese acrobatic scene's widely-accepted discursive marriage between *zájì* and nation-state building. But the location-bound precedence given to the unified group voices of the Ethiopians and the Kenyans at the Huáxīng Acrobatic Art School, lost some of its value in the Habesha Jugglers' move from China to Europe. After they reached the temporary professional oasis of Circus of Africa, concern with communal skill level and learning ability took a backseat to the daily bare-bones task of ensuring the group was simply moving in the right direction.

Performing 'Africa' in China

Not long after I first met them in Huáxīng, the Habesha Jugglers came to Luòyáng to perform for several weeks for Qiǎo (the agent who was auditioning them at the school).[43] Four of them met me at my flat, and we went out for a late-afternoon stroll. Around the corner was a music shop that had several stark-looking metal birdcages lining its outside doors. Each cage housed a single feathery aerodynamic tenant, and there was one in particular that I grew fond of over time, a jet black myna bird who held conversations in Mandarin with me as I passed by the shop on my daily walks. I was excited for them to see what a polite conversationalist my little feathery friend was, so when we reached the music shop, I struck up a dialogue. Suffice it to say, our talk didn't exactly go as planned.

Me: *Nǐ hǎo ma?* (how are you?)

Myna: *Wǒ hěn hǎo, nǐ ne?* (I'm fine, and you?)

Gebre: *Wǒmen shì fēizhōu rén* (we are Africans)

(long pause)

Myna: (loud, hysterical, human-sounding laughter)

Me, Gebre, Ras, Melaku, Abebe: (surprised laughter)

Exacerbated by the fact that I had never heard him laugh before,[44] the irony of the bird's sense of humour certainly wasn't lost on the five of us that day. Later that evening, the Habesha Jugglers and I were seated on the side of Sauna Clubhouse's[45] stage in Luòyáng, watching the handful of songs, dances, and comedy routines that would serve as the prelude to their own performance. I was excited to see it. It was

[43] See chapter three.
[44] Although I didn't know it at the time, that myna would never laugh in front of me again.
[45] This was a large nightclub that frequently hired acrobats through Qiǎo.

going to be my first, but definitely not my last, time to watch them in a show. The crowd was excited too, full of middle-aged spectators enthusiastically swigging beer, and 'clapping' with fake plastic clapper-hands at the appropriate places during our nightly entertainment. When it was finally time for the Habesha Jugglers to get on up there, they performed three acts: a high-energy traditional Ethiopian dance, a song (Melaku), and a club juggling act. I noticed that the crowd, though thick with audience members who had been hanging on the edge of their seats throughout most of the evening, became somewhat disinterested; people lost their smiles, slumped down in their seats, and made polite conversation amongst themselves, as the Habesha Jugglers did their best to give it their all. In the end, the group earned some applause after their performances, but less than I expected to hear, and far less than I thought they deserved. They sat back down next to me, and Ras said that he didn't like this venue. Then he told me that Chinese people only liked to watch "black people" because they *were* black. Gebre focused his thoughts, instead, on how the lighting affected their club juggling routine, while Hiwot talked about braiding my hair. But no one looked very happy, and a frazzled Qiǎo rushed me off in a taxi before we could talk anymore.

The first thing that Chinese people want to see when Africans perform is 'Africa', Shaaban told me once in Huáxīng. It was a complaint that had echoed Ras' similar statement about Chinese people wanting to see black people perform simply because they *were* black, and it was a complaint that, along with Ras', was expressed quite negatively. Later on in my fieldwork, given statements such as those that I had heard in China, I was struck by the absence of any negative discourse amongst Circus of Africa's performers acknowledging the desires of the European audiences who

attended the circus shows; audiences who, like the Chinese spectators Shaaban and Ras talked about, had forked over their hard earned cash in order to get a glimpse of 'Africa'. The situation dependent, racially oriented discursive inconsistency illustrated one of the most important anthropological lessons I would garner from my fieldwork: that context was important, indeed. The disheartening beliefs amongst the Habesha Jugglers and the Kenyans that the first thing that Chinese people wanted to see when Africans performed was 'Africa', and that they wanted to watch "black people" perform simply because they *were* black, was nonetheless confirmed for them in the context of the exchange by this constant and irrefutable referral to them by their hosts as "Africans" or "Africa." They were reduced to "*Fēizhōu*" despite the terminological, and actual, flexibility of the corporeal skills and disciplines they demonstrated, and which had partly brought them as individuals to the exchange in the first place.

The "Prison Break"

Soon after having eaten dinner with the Habesha Jugglers and Dōng Lǎoshī one evening in Luòyáng, the lot of us headed off for the troupe's lodgings, a hotel located next door to the nightclub where the troupe would perform that evening. On the walk over, Ras and I were strolling away from the group and into the thick pancakes of snow that were falling before us, when he told me that the six of them would leave China at the end of March. I was surprised to hear this, and mentioned that Shān Lǎoshī said that they were leaving at the end of April. He said he knew that everyone believed that that was around the time when they would leave, but because they had to be in Germany by March (to commence their contract with the Circus of Africa), they would ship their equipment in advance, and one Sunday, taking only small bags, they

planned to "escape" to Běijīng and take a flight out – all arranged by the Circus of Africa's "promoter" (actually its proprietor), Nelson, who would soon buy their tickets out of China. Ras leaned over and said that only he and Melaku knew about this "prison break" as he jokingly called it, and that if everyone in the group were to know (until the day or two before they left), it could potentially blow the plan. Ras was positive that the school wouldn't let them go early, even for an opportunity like this one. In support of secrecy, Nelson had told him not to tell the rest of the Habesha Jugglers, or anyone at the school, for that matter.

The Kenyans

After the Habesha Jugglers left China for their first tour with Europe's Circus of Africa, I paid one last visit to the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics to have a follow-up interview with Dōng Lǎoshī, and to spend some time with the Kenyan students who were also training there on cultural exchange. There were six of them at the school – all boys. They had arrived in China just one week prior to the Habesha Jugglers, and were guessing that they would be leaving about one month after them (they weren't sure, however, because the school refused to tell them exactly when they were going to leave). They were also unaware that the youngest of the group's passport had expired during their stay, and could potentially cause some problems in terms of their exit date.[46] Aside from the oldest and the leader of the group, Maurice, I only had had minimal contact with them when I had been there on previous visits. The Kenyans and the Ethiopians trained in the same room, but predominantly kept to their own groups during training due to the fact that they were working on acts to perform with other members of their individual groups, rather than with the two groups combined.

[46] As told to me by Dōng Lǎoshī.

They also had separate rooms for sleeping,[47] and tended to eat at separate tables in the dining area, with the four male Habesha Jugglers occupying one table, the two female Habesha Jugglers at another, and the Kenyans at the third.[48] During my visit, Shaaban said to me that when the Habesha Jugglers came back from performing for Qiǎo in Luòyáng, they were full of complaints about the experience. Shaaban laughed as he told me this, and explained that the Kenyans found the Habesha Jugglers' negativity about the time quite funny. "The six of us (Kenyans), we know how to survive in this life," referring to the fact that the Kenyans all came from various 'centres' in Kenya; places that took care of children who were either orphaned or came from problem families. The rules of the centres were not unlike those of the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics. In lieu of this, there was no network of support back home that they could rely on throughout their year in China. From their prior accumulated experiences living at centres in Kenya, they knew that one must build from the ground up, that one cannot start way up at the top. Instead, one must go step by step; one "must use a trick to punch this life."

Shaaban told me that the Ethiopians "like(d) a free place"; they wanted to go out when they wanted, they liked to rest, and they wanted to "enjoy life." The Kenyans were different from the Ethiopians, Shaaban said: "Even the way we are living here," and practising all the time. For example, the Kenyans told me that when they first arrived in Huáxīng, they would wake at 3 am to begin practising on their own because none of them had previous experience in acrobatics, and they were determined to catch their skills up to those of the Habesha Jugglers – each one a gymnastics

[47] The four male Habesha Jugglers shared one living/sleeping room, and the two female Habesha Jugglers shared two attached rooms. The six Kenyan boys were split between two living areas.
[48] After the Habesha Jugglers left China, the Kenyans spread out in the dining area; the three older boys took one table, and the three younger ones supped at another.

champion of their respective regions in Ethiopia. He reminded me that the Ethiopians, for the most part, had money and familial support,[49] whereas the Kenyans only had their embassy. Shaaban was adamant about the fact that "for us, we need to follow the rules for this school"; that because the six of them came from unstable backgrounds without a strong network of support, and because a "problem made us here," they "needed to be humble so that (they) could get what (they) wanted in (their) lives." Compared to the rules of the centres they lived in back in Kenya, Shaaban said, the rules of the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics were very good. Anyway, he told me, "I am free."

Yet to others this might not seem the case, because the school in Huáxīng kept its foreign students locked in the compound at all times with very little exception. But in fact both the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics, and the Kenyan centres the boys had come from, kept them locked in their compounds the majority of the time. When I asked Shaaban what freedom meant to him under those circumstances, he replied by saying that "I like a free place" where he could go out, and come back as he pleased, "and that's why I'm working hard in China. I want my future to be like that." In conjunction with this bare bones pragmatic notion of freedom, Shaaban expressed uncertainty about how the current lack of it would affect him; how he would handle going back to Kenya, without really being able to answer the lot of questions he anticipated awaiting him about China and Chinese culture because here in China: "It's like we are hiding." Despite the fact that Shaaban was working hard in the present to better create the "free" conditions he desired for his future, he felt that by doing just that – by obeying the rules to a tee, and by practising hard, and often - he was

[49] Relatively speaking, and there were exceptions to this.

exercising his freedom of choice right there and then in that moment: "I have choice because I make my choice by myself" he told me. And to Shaaban, that choice specifically meant that in China he, "need(ed) to make (his) basic good."

Going "Out to Freedom"

In their search for "freedom," the African students often experienced and referred to explicit racist behaviour while they were in China. In fact, the racism that Africans on acrobatics cultural exchange had to deal with was debilitating and dislocating enough on a phenomenological level that metaphors of deep and disoriented organs were expressed by Ras who couldn't tell his "heart from (his) stomach." At times, however, they were able to use the way that these discourses disrupted the rules of *zájì* and the Huáxīng School to their advantage. Refusing to participate in daily cleaning, insisting "by power" on going out on their own in Běijīng, and hopping the fence at night to study magic were just a few examples. In light of this, the foreigners' Chinese teachers needed to "change (their) mind(s)" so they could listen to the African students' "culture," sometimes resulting in the flexible navigation of and enforcement of the rules. When an "African" acrobatic student "beat" her Chinese colleagues by working "hard" for her "future" and performing high-level magic, she was excused of sneakily breaking the rules to do so, and then had the rules removed especially for her just to ensure an even quicker progression in the future; as long as the performance was "perfect," then anything, even "freedom," was possible.

'Freedom' was a concept that was often referred to, both implicitly and explicitly, by my interlocutors in the field. It was also a central theme to many of the events that I witnessed and heard about second hand while I was in the field. While I was in China,

freedom was what Shaaban hoped to gain through willing submission to the rigorous training and the form of confinement that the school in Huáxīng offered him, and it also informed the style of under-the-radar "prison break" that Ras referred to when he spoke of silently heading for Europe's Circus of Africa straight from China.

On one of my later visits with the Habesha Jugglers in Huáxīng, I spent the final moments sitting with Ras, looking out his window and sharing a fresh mango. We sat in calm silence for a while, and I watched the Chinese flag that was perched atop one of the school's massive grey buildings, waver back and forth in the dusty wind. Ras looked over at the back fence, and turned to me and said that he used to drink a lot when they first arrived in Huáxīng. He would hop the fence at night – the same fence that Jina scaled in order to avoid her teacher's gaze during the late night study of magic - and go buy beer. I found it very easy to imagine the loneliness he must have been feeling, and I struggled to comprehend how they coped with the ambivalent situation they found themselves in at the school. Over the period of time that I had known the Ethiopian students, our conversations had been strewn with statements like "this is a prison," "China is nothing to me," and, "I imagine Chinese are teaching by technique, but I didn't see any technique. I saw power." And yet, they were certainly not prisoners locked in a cell. They had all agreed to come there. The experience was serving as a springboard for the next step in achieving their goals. And if they really didn't want to do something, they seemed to be quite adept at getting around it somehow. But after hearing what Ras said, when the taxi reached the front gate to pick me up, I was struck hard by the image of the three Habesha Jugglers, who had walked me out, joking with the cab driver that they were going to come along for the ride. And then, with a lump in my throat, I watched the gate lock shut behind me.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have painted a foundational ethnographic picture of the Habesha Jugglers and other African performers at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics in China. Amidst larger push/pull factors that shaped the global trajectories of African circus performers and their on the ground manifestations in the mundane day-to-day, I have begun to examine how the Habesha Jugglers developed flexible and corporeally rooted culturally hybrid forms of identity that moved beyond the scope of the simple production of circus skills and acts. I have explored how they navigated the rules of the school, training methodologies, on and offstage top down racialized discourses about 'Africa' and 'Africans', their own ethnic and group identities, *zájì* practice, an importance of working hard to gain freedom, and the potential that the cultural exchange could act as a springboard for them in relationship to their larger life goals. The power laden racially-charged context of the *zájì* exchanges involving African students in China undoubtedly reveals that there was a lot more at work in the formation of hybrid identity than the development of a new hybrid style of circus (Farrell 2007); such a context implores us to consider how the players themselves negotiated for themselves, and on their own terms, the exploration of which is my ultimate aim in this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO

The Training

"22,140 minutes… How do you measure seven weeks training in China? In days, 49; in hours, 369, in flips of a bowl, 12, 849. That's 1 obliterated parasol, 5 broken legs (table), and one new hole in my head."

- Luca, an American foot juggler trained in China[50]

Introduction: Limits to Inculcation

In the previous chapter I have ethnographically contextualized the Habesha Jugglers at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics. In order to put the Habesha Jugglers' cultural exchange more into context, however, it is important to discuss some key elements of acrobatics, or *zájì*, as it is known in China. In this chapter I will focus specifically on the elements of *zájì* training that proved to be problematic for the African students on cultural exchange in Huáxīng. By that I mean that there were parts of the discipline of *zájì*, including certain teaching methodologies in China, and characteristics of the foreign students, that may have hindered either the foreign students' ability to be fully receptive to the practice (i.e., to be "learned by power," as Melaku would have said), or the Chinese teachers' willingness to invest in training them. However, because Chinese acrobatics is such a widespread and thick discipline with an extensive history, to present ethnography to suit this purpose means that many elements of *zájì* will be necessarily left out of the discussion. For that very reason I am making a disclaimer here that it is not my aim to present a three dimensional, or an impartial,

[50] In a personal correspondence (January 15, 2006).

picture of the 'complete' acrobatics world in China (see Farrell 2007, 2008, 2009 for an extensive English language account of *zájì*). Rather than portraying a thorough depiction of China's *zájì* world, the ethnographic examples in this chapter intend to represent the most important ways that the normal *zájì* training regiment in China was *not* compatible with the Habesha Jugglers' learning capacity as students there. In fact, it may appear that I am sketching a very biased picture of Chinese acrobatics indeed, but it will appear that way precisely because it is *only* the problematic components of the genre (to some foreigners in any case) that I will endeavour to draw attention to, in order to better grasp identity formation as it took place amongst the Habesha Jugglers.

All acrobatics in China before 1949 was passed on in a familial (and supposedly strict) way, but after 1949, when the CCP swept the Imperial government all the way to Taiwan, the level of acrobatics dramatically increased (both aesthetically and in terms of trick level which was influenced by an improvement in props) in parallel fashion with "*Zhōngguó de fǎ zhǎn*" (China's development). The massive institutional surge of *zájì tuán* meant that consistently the average acrobat in China began training around the age of six, often sent by broken and/or struggling families who looked at *zájì* as the best option to increase economic capital in their families. Their schooling lasted approximately six years, after which they would be considered professional and able to work as part of a troupe. Students could also work, but were generally not given a cut of the profits the school made for their performances or 'fieldwork'. As students gained confidence, they were more adept at performing. Money became an essential part of the equation for the performers who, much like the Habesha Jugglers and other African performers on *zájì* exchanges, were looking for ways to make a

better life for themselves and their families in relatively difficult situations. No matter how lucrative a person's career might have become, in China individuals were always held back by the lateral way that money funnelled through the maze of troupe bureaucracy, with an individual acrobat only taking in roughly half of what a show paid for their services at best. The good conditions that an international contract might provide them with would be temporary and did not significantly subset the "bitter" conditions that *zájì* training had inculcated in the acrobats over years of strict tutelage. At the average age of retirement[51] acrobats in China were left with few options when faced with the competition of a massive population, most of whom had better education than those the *zájì tuáns* had churned out.

I was based at the *zájì tuán* in the same province the Habesha Jugglers' exchange took place in for the first few months of my research, while I took periodic trips to Huáxīng to visit the Habesha Jugglers. The *tuán* I was at was one of the more reputed, well-respected state-run troupes in China, and they supplied acts to many large-scale international circuses (including the Urban Vibe Circus in the U.S.). I spent a substantial period of time at the *tuán*, observing daily periods of training that the full-fledged troupe members engaged in, and was compelled by the general sense of disinterest there seemed to be about their practice. Many of the troupe members spent the majority of their time chatting, smoking, and playing on their mobiles as opposed to training. When they did practice, a good portion of them seemed to be going through the motions as minimally as possible. This sat in stark contrast with the rigorous and somewhat violent training regimens of one particular group of *gōngfū* (kung fu) trained performers – the *wǔshù* boys as I called them – which I focused on

[51] Around 25 years old.

at the *tuán*. Regardless of which end of the spectrum I was looking at, however, it didn't take me long to understand that the majority of Chinese acrobats I met in the field (though not all of them), did not enjoy their livelihoods. Most were not in it for the love of the game, having been sent by parents to learn at a very young age, but were doing their best to eek out a living by capitalizing on the only real skill they had going for them at that point in their lives: *zájì*. This, among other things, differentiated them from the Habesha Jugglers and other foreigners I met training on exchange in Huáxīng. The Habesha Jugglers loved what they did, and despite the struggles that plagued them in China and beyond, they were doing circus with a passion wherever they were.

In this chapter I laterally outline three main problematic elements of training acrobatics in China for the Habesha Jugglers by presenting ethnographic data from the *tuán* in Méizhōu. I define these three problems of training as problems of: age, susceptibility to physical discipline, and language ability. The ethnography in this chapter will help disambiguate the deeper cultural context in which the Habesha Jugglers found themselves, and also uncover some of the primary obstacles to effectively training *zájì* for a foreigner in China. Because the Habesha Jugglers were not actually being taught by teachers at the times that I went to visit them at the Huáxīng School, my understanding as to what was and was not compatible for them came from the following: discussions I had with them about training, spending extensive time with the Sudanese performers during *zájì* training in Shànyì (which I describe in chapter three), spending extensive time with Chinese acrobats training

zájì, spending time with American acrobats training *zájì* in China,[52] and my own training in China.

Brains and Legs

My foot juggling teacher, Shān Lǎoshī, was ten years old when he first started learning *zájì* in 1951. He went from learning at a private *măxì xuéxiào* (circus school) owned by his adoptive parents in Huáxīng, to becoming a full fledged member and eventually a teacher at the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán, and an instructor who counted a handful of private foreign students as his fledglings. Needless to say, he knew a lot about the acrobatics world in China. One day Shān Lǎoshī and I were at my flat talking about acrobatics schools. I asked him if a foreigner learning *zájì*, and a Chinese person learning *zájì* was the same. He told me that yes it was – because both of them had *tuǐ* (legs) that were capable of learning. Shān Lǎoshī professed that if any person performed 100 or 1,000 repetitions of the same exercise, their legs would learn how to do it right. Their minds and their legs were the same, he said, and, of course, you had stupid and smart people everywhere. I mentioned that the acrobatics teaching methods were not the same in China as abroad. He agreed, but also said that "*lǎoshī de fāngfǎ shì bù yīyàng de*" (the teacher's methods were not the same). He gave the example of Luca, the American who studied foot juggling with him for three months, and could perform the jar right away, but a "*hēi rén*" (black person) whom he knew of who had studied the same act with another teacher for a year still couldn't perform it. The student's success depended upon the combination of the teacher, and the student's "*cōngmíng*" (cleverness), Shān Lǎoshī said. He said that if a person had a good teacher, they would be a good student. Actually it was the *nǎozi* (brain) that

[52] On a brief one-month trip I took, I was able to observe several American circus performer friends of mine who were training there.

needed intelligence, more than the *tuǐ*. He explained that if a student with a good brain spun the jar with their feet everyday, each day increasing the number of minutes of the exercise by thirty seconds, they would quickly understand how to execute the movement correctly. He elaborated that if the brain of the student was good, the student would learn how to juggle the jar in sixth months; if not, then it would take a year. Shān Lǎoshī ended this thought with the all too common statement "*zájì shì hěn kǔ de*" (acrobatics is a bitter one).

The Important Things in Life

A number of my Chinese interlocutors, including Qiǎo, had explained to me that when they were very young, and started training acrobatics, they didn't really know what acrobatics was. Qiǎo told me that the kids start training gradually, and slowly. Their bodies had time to get used to it. And now, she said, more parents were letting their kids choose whether or not they wanted to do it. At first, when the kids got to school, they told their parents they wanted to go home. The teacher would tell the "parents that this is a tough stage. Every acrobat must pass this tough stage. If they pass this stage, every child feels okay." The tough stage generally lasted one year. After two years, when the child could do more skills and had started performing, they began to feel good. She told me that seven or eight months after she started training as a child, she went with her classmates to the train station to run away. After they got there, they realized they didn't have money for tickets, and went back to the acrobatics school. Qiǎo recalled that when she was of that young age training *zájì,* she sent a letter to her mother, asking her to come and take her back home. She wrote that she didn't want to study, that it was tough and that she was tired. Her mother responded by telling her that, "good children do everything, (and) have tough

(experiences). You need to hold on. Everything is tough. This is only a stage." I asked her if she thought her mother was right. She said that now she thought so, but at the time, she only thought that she wanted to go home.

When I asked Shān Lǎoshī why China didn't have older students, he replied that China had so many young students because they could learn many things. Older students, Shān Lǎoshī offered, unlike the younger ones, would think about *why* they were doing *zájì;* they knew they wanted to perform, and to make money. Shān Lǎoshī rubbed his fingers together to indicate heavy flows of cash, as he said this. Older students made good students, he explained further, because they knew why they were doing what they were doing. Shān Lǎoshī, himself having taught a handful of older foreign students (myself included), may have been biased in this department; most other Chinese interlocutors of mine thought that acrobatics only made sense for younger students to learn. In China, young students of acrobatics were capable of learning everything, but if an older student[53] wanted to learn, he or she must focus on one discipline (e.g., foot juggling) in order to have a good level, Shān Lǎoshī said. And for any student to have a good level, he continued, the teacher must be very strict with them. If they were not strict, the children could not learn well. All students, once they reached the age of 14-15, liked a strict teacher, Shān Lǎoshī said, because if their acrobatics level was good, then they could perform, and if they could perform, then they could make money, and if they could make money, then they could have a girlfriend/boyfriend, wife/husband, house, car, and all the important things in life. Money was a very important element of acrobatics, Shān Lǎoshī told me. Later on, this point would also be brought to my attention again and again by the Habesha

[53] Aged 20-30.

Jugglers, and even some of the Sudanese children. I asked Shān Lǎoshī why the teachers were so strict with their students if they, themselves, knew what it was like to have such strict instruction and bitter training. He replied that the teachers also knew that they were able to reach a very high acrobatic level very quickly as a result of the physical and mental demands of strict training, so they wanted to train their students in the same way in order for them to advance quickly also.

"Training is Bitter"

Our conversation inevitably turned to the taboo subject of physical discipline in training. He tried to tell me that the *zájì tuán* had a rule against it, but that the teachers did it when they got angry, and that if they did get violent, the *tuán* leader would criticize them. China had heavy "*fǎlǜ*" (laws) against this type of treatment, but he conceded, when I asked, that if the teacher hit a student, the student would learn much faster because they were afraid. Shān Lǎoshī told me that *zájì* was an acquired taste, like coffee or alcohol, due to the bitter pain, and exhaustion, involved in it.

Qiǎo confirmed Shān Lǎoshī's thoughts about physical discipline. We were in a hotel room as I had accompanied her to Huáxīng in search of acts she could bring to Luòyáng. We were seated on our beds, chatting late into the night, when Qiǎo, talking over the ambiguous moans of a woman coming from a nearby room, explained to me that students of acrobatics in China tolerated a lot of pain; especially in the beginning. When they first started training, they were very young, and completely afraid of their teachers. Rightfully so, Qiǎo said, a good portion of them would beat the students for the first one to three years of their education, though not all teachers did it.

Qiǎo explained that, typically, the children would cry a lot when they first began acrobatics. The teachers would tell them that whether they cried or laughed, it was all the same, and eventually, over time, the children's tears would stop. When they were finally mature enough to fully, and stoically, submit to training their skills, their confidence was built up; when their confidence was built up, they began to like training. Very few children actually wanted to leave acrobatics school after the first few years had passed, but for those that did, their parents generally didn't want them to. The first one or two years were always very tough, Qiǎo said, but after that, the children would get used to it. Like Qiǎo, many of the Chinese acrobats I met told me they had tried to run away when they first began training acrobatics because it was so difficult. After the first few years of their training had passed, however, the children "don't think (anymore)"; when they stopped thinking, this meant that they had finally grown "*xíguàn*" (accustomed) to the *zájì* life. Then, Qiǎo said: "They are like… machines."

Beating was a normal part of physical sport education in China, but not necessarily a part of other types of education, Qiǎo told me. There were two main, pragmatic reasons behind it. First of all, when the students were hit, they became "more good, more quickly." Since they didn't "have control over their bodies" when they began, the physical violence would speed up the process for them. I asked her if she thought that the level of acrobatics in China would be as high without the beating that took place; she said that it would be okay, but it would take a lot more time for the students to learn. With hitting, everything came quickly. Qiǎo gave me an example: if a student's leg wasn't straight during a movement, and his teacher told him to "straighten your leg," maybe next time his leg would be a little bit more straight; but

if his teacher hit the boy's leg with a stick instead, the next time the boy performed the movement, his leg would be very straight.

On top of speeding up the learning process, beating the student also assisted him or her in developing a sophisticated level of spatial awareness that depended upon an above-average bodily sensitivity. For example, Qiăo told me, in the beginning of training, a student might think about where their hand was in space, but forget about their foot; then, later, they might think about the placement of their foot, without regards to their head. In the beginning, they could not control their bodies, Qiăo, again, emphasized. When a teacher hit a student, it helped him *control* his body, and it also helped him to *feel* himself. When a student first started training, maybe he didn't feel his knee, but with a light hit to it, however, he suddenly began to develop enough sensitivity to feel his own knee better, and then to be able to control it.

I asked Qiăo whether beating a student, more often than not, helped or hurt the student. She, like all the *zájì* teachers with whom I was able to discuss the matter, emphatically believed that beating helped the student. The teacher wanted her student to have the most beautiful skill possible, which was greatly assisted by the sharp stinging pain of a stick, stiletto heel, or the elder teacher's fist. She believed that one of the philosophical justifications for a teacher to hit his or her students was due to the fact that "in ancient times" when the children were hit, they became more successful at whatever they were attempting to learn. Even though Qiăo put stock in the effectiveness of China's time-tested methods of physical discipline in acrobatics, she, herself, didn't hit her students, she claimed, and thought that hitting students was not

okay in general. It was also illegal at the time of my research, but the police were very "busy. They have many things to do." Qiǎo told me, with a small laugh.

The Troupe Members

Most of the working acrobats with whom I was in contact in China were in their early twenties. Many had been sent to the schools by their parents when they were young for various reasons that were beyond their control, including lack of money, divorce, and poor studies on the part of the child. A few, however, wanted to learn *zájì*. But in the majority of these cases, to strategizing and/or desperate parents, acrobatic training seemed to be the best (if not the only) way for their child to secure a better future; one that, if the kid was lucky enough to make it into one of the state-run troupes, would come complete with the relative comfort of professional (and, of course, relative monetary) stability for the rest of their lives.[54] Lì Húa, Yuèhai, and Chāo were three primary examples of Chinese acrobats who were, for better or worse, headed down this precise path.

Twentyish-year-old Lì Húa of the Méizhōu troupe was sent to the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics when she was just six years old. Her mother sent her there because the family was very poor, and Lì Húa would be able to work and make money after only six years of schooling. This was of clear immediate financial benefit to their family because Lì Húa didn't know her father, who had left her mother for another woman. If she had gone to a regular school, it would have taken a lot longer for her to make the

[54] These were the dominant reasons that older acrobats that I knew had started training. From what I was told in the field, they were also more the reasons of the past; now, parents who wanted their children to develop some special skills more frequently sent them to train in acrobatics. However, along with the rise of China in the world economics department, China's one child policy had deeply affected parents' willingness to send their children to train. This practice, as well as the physically violent methodologies of training, I was told were becoming less and less common as time went on.

same kind of money. Lì Húa didn't like the school because they beat the kids, and for the first year she cried all the time. But nevertheless, she said, in retrospect, that her mother's choice to give her over to the world of *zájì*, was the right one. She spent three years at the school in Huáxīng, training hard, before moving on to school in Luòyáng. The Luòyáng School's leader had gone to the Huáxīng School, and picked Lì Húa ("I want that one" she laughingly told me that he said), amongst others, to come to train at the school in Luòyáng. Aside from *zájì*, she learned *hànzì* (Chinese characters), and basic math (e.g., counting) for two hours per day over the period of her six-year education in Luòyáng. When I asked Lì Húa if she liked to do *zájì*, she immediately said no. *Zájì,* "is the opposite of sweet," Lì Húa said, but, "it is my life," and so she must go "hand in hand" with it. Nobody else in the troupe liked acrobatics, Lì Húa said. Why, I asked her. For the same reasons she didn't: it was bitter, and, in China especially, one's career could be exceedingly short lived (with the average age of retirement for an acrobat being around the age of twenty-five). Why did they stay then, I wondered aloud. Lì Húa said that she, and everyone else she knew, stayed because of the money. Lì Húa told me that she didn't know anything else apart from *zájì*. This made her worry. She told me that when she turns twenty-five, most likely she would not be able to perform anymore, and since she didn't want to teach, she saw marrying as being her most promising option.

Also member of the Méizhōu troupe, Yuèhai, told me that she cried a lot at the school in Huáxīng (but in Luòyáng, she only cried a little) because her "*liàn bù hǎo*" (practice wasn't good). She got beat a lot in the first two years there (but in her third, she only got beat a little). She told me that all her teachers were men; big fat men who beat their students. But, she added, to be fair, the female teachers also beat their

students. Yuèhai told me there was a very old saying that was applicable in terms of understanding why physical discipline was, indeed, helpful to the students whom it supposedly hurt: "*bù dǎ bù cháng cái*" (not hit not grow ability). As Yuèhai was beat less and less in Huáxīng, she also began to like *zájì* a little bit, but still emphasized that she didn't really have a choice in the matter of whether she learned it or not. I asked her if she had a choice about *zájì* now. "I'm not married, I don't know," Yuèhai replied. I took this to mean that until she was married, she had no choice; and after she married, it would all depend on the situation. She planned on teaching at the Luòyáng School after she retired in three to five year's time.

Chāo was an acrobat in his early twenties who was originally from Huáxīng. He was a member of the Méizhōu troupe, but for the past several years Chāo had made the choice to focus on learning a juggling act, rather than participate in the troupe as an all-around acrobat anymore. This meant that, mostly, when the troupe had performances, Chāo did not take part in them. When I asked him if he liked to train *zájì*, he told me, with a laughing smile, that he liked to learn his specific juggling act. Before, when he did many acts, he said it was too tiring. Chāo told me that the troupe also didn't like to practice *zájì* because it was very tiring. But, unlike him (who found an act he really loved doing, and spent lots of time devoting himself to perfecting it), the troupe just messed around, smoked, and chatted with each other, whenever not training was a feasible option. On a prior visit I made to China, Chāo said that he didn't like to work with the troupe because they were lazy.

Chāo started acrobatics when he was seven years old. Because, at the age of seven, Chāo hadn't shown much promise as a student in the academic department, his

mother had taken him to an acrobatics school where they would evaluate his potential. The teacher at the school wanted him, and his mother said okay. He told me that if his mother and father hadn't agreed, he wouldn't have ever gone to study acrobatics on his own initiative. When asked if his parents liked *zájì*, Chāo said no. He added that children who learnt *zájì* didn't like it because it was very tiring. Older students (eighteen and over) who learnt *zájì,* however, were another story; they often did like it, Chāo said, because they, the older students, had a choice in the matter, whereas younger students didn't. Chāo said, again, with a smile, that he liked his juggling act. And that it was his choice to do it. When I asked what happened to the kids' (who initially hadn't had a choice about learning *zájì*, and hadn't liked it) feelings as they got older, he said that some liked it, and some didn't. In ten years time, Chāo said, he wanted to stop *zájì* completely, and open up a restaurant. He had no interest in teaching acrobatics. Chāo wanted to do what he *really* wanted to do for the rest of his life, which was to open up a restaurant, after his *zájì* career was over. Much unlike the American and European circus performers I knew who passionately pursued their careers – their dreams - against the grain of 'normal' society (often giving up the comfort of financial stability in the process), *zájì* certainly wasn't all that Chāo wanted to do with his life; it was mostly a way for someone whose only real means of capital was his unusual bodily skills to ensure relative economic stability in a country with the highest population in the world and a wealth of professional competition.

Pickin'

How did acrobatics teachers in China know that students like Lì Húa, Yuèhai, and Chāo would make good acrobats? Qiǎo laid out the general selection process for children at the school in Méizhōu for me. It went as follows: a crew of ten or so

teachers would ‘quiz’ the children at various acrobatics and gymnastics schools. They would look at children who had had one or two years of training, and just from seeing a cartwheel, or a handstand, the teachers would be able to tell who would be good and who wouldn’t. Bones were important, as were figure and face. Qiǎo said that a hundred years ago, when people performed “*mǎxì"* just to survive, face and figure wouldn’t have mattered. But now they did, and even those students who showed potential in terms of skills, would have been passed up for acrobatics training if they had been unlucky in the gene department. Personality, Qiǎo said, was perhaps the most important thing. Qiǎo professed the quality of “*kāilǎng”* (open and clear, cheerful) as being invaluable for an acrobat. The potential students who passed such a quiz, were taken on board the Méizhōu School for free. There, they learned acrobatics for six years, performing without pay as part of their education, and, upon graduation, were obliged to work for the Méizhōu troupe for a certain number of years as compensation for the ‘free’ high-level training they had received. The Méizhōu School, which was public, provided two hours of culture classes daily. Acrobats who were taught at private schools, rather than the state-run ones like Méizhōu, were not so fortunate, however. Private schools, usually associated with circus rather than acrobatics, had a much more extensive history, seeing as state run *zájì tuáns* and *xuéxiào* (schools) were only instituted post-1949. In private *mǎxì* and *zájì xuéxiào*, the students were usually not taught academic subjects at all, and therefore, when they retired, they found themselves in very difficult positions. The women could become wives, as both Yuèhai and Lì Húa aspired to be, but the men were left empty-handed. Some of them wound up opening other private acrobatics schools, but the market obviously wasn’t big enough to accommodate everyone. Qiǎo told me that most

parents who had attended private acrobatics schools, wouldn't let their own kids train as acrobats.

Other non-acrobats I knew echoed this sentiment. For example, a mutual friend of Chāo's and mine, Shàoqiáng, a medical doctor, was having dinner with Chāo and me at my flat. As usual, we were talking about acrobatics. Shàoqiáng said it was sad. He said that there was a lot of stress in China. In 1980, the economy shifted, and now everyone wanted to make money. He told me that if he had a child, he would not let them practise *zájì*. When I asked him why, he said it was because they would be so limited in what they could do afterwards. He said that economics was very related to the lives of acrobats in China, but that the economy in China was different. The Chinese economy was growing, but it was foreign countries that often profited from China's labour (i.e., through outsourcing). He also told me that most of the parents sent their kids to learn *zájì* because they wanted them to have some special skills, or because their kids didn't study well. He said that lack of money, time, or divorce, were more of reasons from the past.

The Canadian

When I initially began my research at the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán, I was focusing particularly on a group of ten boys who were training a perch pole act for Cirque Celeste's new fixed production in Asia that I was hoping to follow abroad after China. The act involved two to four bases standing on rolling globes and balancing poles perched atop one of their shoulders. The flyers would climb up the poles, and the bases would then toss the flyers from one pole to another pole to be caught. These *wǔshù* boys had been selected the previous year from a well-known *wǔshù gōngfū*

school in a nearby village, and none of them had any prior traditional acrobatic experience. They began their training when I was in China for a short visit in April of 2006, and were supposed to leave for rehearsals in Canada in late 2007. The *wǔshù* boys were not officially part of the troupe. They trained in the same large training hall, but the troupe kept to one side, and the *wǔshù* boys to the other (with the exception of the few acts [e.g. juggling, hand-to-hand] that required little space). Although I never saw them, or any of the other Chinese acrobats I met in Méizhōu outside of China during my fieldwork, I did get a small taste of how their China training may have related to such an international context when Tom Macklin, the Artistic Director for a new production of Canada's famous Cirque Celeste, came to Luòyáng to pay a visit to the *tuán* to check on the status of their act. Cirque Celeste had approached the Běijīng based entertainment agency they had a longstanding relationship with, AACB,[55] to find a Chinese troupe that they could hire to perform this specific act they had in mind. AACB then contacted the Méizhōu troupe, and another troupe from Shàopíng. Both troupes learned the act, and after some time, Tom paid a trip to China to see both of them. It was up to him to choose which troupe he wanted, and he selected Méizhōu.

The day of the Canadian's arrival, I was sure to get to the Méizhōu *tuán* at two thirty sharp. There was a buzz of excitement in the air, but I wasn't sure how much of it was coming from me, and how much of it was coming from other acrobats around me. The training hall was cleaner than I had seen it before, but, nonetheless, there was not so much that could have be done to combat the hours and years of accumulated Luòyáng dust that had made its home there. The trampoline had been moved to the

[55] See chapter four.

other side of the room, and the area in front of the mirrors had been cleared. The *wǔshùs* (minus Bái,[56] and plus Ming-húa [57] and another small boy who I didn't know) were are all dressed alike, in clingy black training pants with a white stripe down the side of the leg, and black t-shirts that said in white print (both in *hànzì* [Chinese characters] and in English) 'Běijīng Dancing Institute'. At two forty five, I heard a teacher say "*láile*" (they've come) and the *wǔshùs* started practising, while other people shuffled around, looking busy. There were a few of the more prominent troupe members in the room. The bases had their own pants on over their show pants, but soon they would remove them. More teachers and leaders than usual were wandering around the *tuán*. One woman said to Tián Lǎoshī: [58] "*Nǐ shuō tāmen láile*" (you said they've come) when there were still no Canadians in sight. There was a lot of tension in the air; tension so thick it could be cut with a knife. Even I felt nervous.

When the Canadian entered the room, I saw that there was just one of him, accompanied by the two main troupe leaders and a big fat Chinese translator. He was middle aged, with striking blond spiky hair, jeans, and a perfectly crisp Cirque Celeste denim jacket on. I was sitting by the door, and he didn't notice me as he passed by. They went straight to the blue chairs that had been moved for him onto the centre of the carpet, facing the mirror. There was a bench in front of the chairs, on which they would put the bottles of water the troupe brought for him. The two leaders, Jié, an administrative assistant, and another man who was short and wearing a wig stood around him. Over the period of the next few hours, the leaders would come and go, as the Canadian watched the *wǔshùs'* act. There was a deafening silence in the room after he entered it. I had never heard such silence there before. The *wǔshùs* kept

[56] He was one of the flyers and was just starting to learn.
[57] He was a younger troupe member.
[58] He was the second, younger, teacher of the *wǔshù* boys.

practising, and he watched on. Right in the beginning, one of the bases, Angúo uncharacteristically messed up something that was relatively easy (in my perception, anyway), but as the minutes passed, the boys seemed to get more comfortable, and the mistakes became no more than usual. The man was talking with the translator, and I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I could tell they were speaking in English. They seemed to be talking about technical things (i.e. space, and dimension) relating to the elements of the act.

The *wǔshùs* moved to working on the balls. Both Liáng Lǎoshī and Tián Lǎoshī were surprisingly quiet. If they gave any instruction at all, it was almost in a whisper. Even when the poles were dropped, the teachers suppressed their usual yells and reprimands. This hiding didn't seem to be easy for them. I took some notes and the presence of another foreigner in the room (also taking notes, but very different ones) made me feel freer to do so. The *wǔshùs* ran through the act with music, and the Canadian applauded at the end. Two or three Chinese in the room halfway joined in, and I was reminded of the first time that a troupe member practised the act with the *wǔshùs* to music; all of the troupe member girls looked on, and howled and applauded. Those were the only moments I had ever heard clapping in this room. They rested. They were resting a lot more than usual while the Canadian was there. He had been discussing technical details with the translator, who had been asking the leaders questions about everything. He then started to play a video on his computer. Many of the teachers looked on, and the boys were called over to watch as well. In fact, I became the only person in the room who was not there, watching. I felt uncomfortable, like a caged animal relegated to the sidelines until one leader told me to go over and take a look. I jumped up and went over. It was a video of a man on the

Chinese pole. His movements were very slow and beautiful. He was innovative and creative in the way he was using the apparatus. I felt artistically inspired for the first time since I had arrived in China. For the first time, I remembered why I had come here, and why I loved circus. I felt passionate again. I will not move from this spot until I have talked to this man, I thought. After the end of the video, he said, with a smile "just to give you some ideas." He explained that it wasn't that he didn't like what they were doing, but he just wanted them to explore more, and to "play" (a word he used a lot while he was there). The translator told the group, and I wondered what the Chinese were thinking. I could not read their reactions at all. There was not much expression going on. Most of the time, as he talked, I only saw the Canadian's back, the all-powerful heavenly logo of the Cirque Celeste radiating out at me, blinding me by its divine light.

He pulled out plans for the theatre. They were computer generated. There was an earth that he said was real and that would be moving around the theatre during the entire performance. He pulled out architectural plans to show them. He wanted to photograph the equipment, but said he didn't want to interfere with the boys' training. They went to the trampoline. He said something about the safety lines being thinner in Montréal, but he insured them that they were very safe. I wondered if he had any clue that this sounded utterly ridiculous to me.[59] After a little more equipment talk, people dispersed a bit, and I took my chance. I sat next to him, and introduced myself. Amazingly, we were left relatively alone. His name was Tom. He was in charge of all the acrobatics for this show. He was originally from Chicago, and performed Chinese pole and some trampoline. Then he moved to Montréal and joined Cirque Celeste.

[59] The safety lines that were used in the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán were scrappy, tattered, and worn down to the point of utter fatigue.

This was the first time he had been in charge (to such a large extent) of a Cirque production. They were choosing this act between Méizhōu and Shàopíng, and he said it was a difficult choice since both groups had been working on it when he came to see them in October. Then he told me that '13'[60] was "his baby"; he was the Artistic Director from its beginning. He was also in the original cast of 'Rêves'.[61] He said he had just come back from Russia (he was there for four days), and that they were hoping to sign a contract with a great act there. He said China, Russia, and North Korea all had good acrobatics going on. He got up and photographed some safety belts, the inside of balls, poles on shoulders, and so on. When he finished, he came over and said that he would be here tomorrow at nine to take some more photos, but then he would be going to Běijīng in the afternoon, and then to another city to look at equipment.

The following morning, Tom had arrived again. Chāo was told to stop practising in his corner, and to move all of his stuff out of the way. The boys were wearing their 'costumes' again, but the bases left their own trousers on this time. The environment, though barren, was more relaxed than the day before. The female dance teacher corrected the boys verbally. So did Liáng Lǎoshī and Tián Lǎoshī. They were a bit louder than yesterday, though still minus their harsh usual tones. Tom videotaped their act. There was less tension, and the boys were given more breaks. Tom felt free to move around as he wished, and I took the cue from him to do the same. I joined the group, as he talked to them about opening their minds, and about play. He had four bases hold a pole, and Huǒjīn, the most experienced flyer, climbed up it and started doing tricks as the pole swayed and bended under his weight and with his movements.

[60] An innovative fixed Cirque Celeste production in the U.S. that used water in the majority of its acts.
[61] Another fixed North American Cirque Celeste production.

Tom talked about the idea of coming on with lots of poles, and people, and that maybe it was even a whole forest of poles they would be in. He explained that they needed to remember that they were part of a story. It was about a girl named Dorothy, and her imaginings, dreams, and story; that they were not just there "to do tricks." He started to tell them that in Montréal they would learn dance, acting, and so on. He wanted them to be prepared so that when they got there, they were not caught off guard when they would be asked to play, or to improvise. He assured them that it would be fun. He kept using the words "play" and "fun." I wondered what, if anything, these words meant to the *wǔshù* boys. I watched the faces of the troupe leaders when he said these things. One leader looked like he was trying to take it in. A dance teacher seemed to understand what Tom was saying. The rest of them showed no reaction at all. Tom had the bases try the poles almost like Russian bar, and the experienced flyer Bó'ài did handstand on them, and swung around a bit, although he clearly didn't really know what to do when asked to experiment. He looked uncomfortable in this unchartered territory. Tom turned to me and said, with a laugh: "They're gonna be glad to get rid of me, asking them to do all these crazy things!" I said: "I won't be." And I meant it. It was refreshing to have him here. He stood for all the things that I loved about the circus.

The teachers told Tom that the boys could do *wǔshù*. He videotaped some demonstrations of them. Angúo practised *tàijí* (t'ai chi), but it was lacking the confidence and personality he could so easily have projected. The leader of the *wǔshù*s and a base, Bō, did some beautiful *wǔshù*. Another base, Jīyuán, started to do some *wǔshù* with a stick, and broke it immediately. Everyone laughed, and Tom said to me: "That will make the blooper reel. It's too bad, cause that was gonna be good."

He did a whip routine instead. It was great, and the chain he used made a great sound. I said to Tom that the sound was almost like wind through the trees of poles he was talking about. He replied that the idea was not set in stone, and that it was just an idea; sometimes "you need to give the director ideas." The remark sounded a bit loaded, almost as if he meant that, in China, where artistic interpretation in acrobatics generally did not compare with the high skill level, you needed to give the director ideas. After the rest of the demonstration (involving play fighting and the four 'good' *wŭshù*-ers doing kicks, and so on), the translator told Tom that one of the boys could do trapeze (although he really meant straps), and wanted to show Tom. Tom said that he was almost out of film, and it would be better to send it on the next monthly "video update" that they would send to Cirque Celeste in May. He stressed, again, the need for them to play. The more they could play, the better it would be for them, he said. Tom clearly felt free - free to say what he wanted to, and do what he wanted to. He mentioned trying different ways to climb the Chinese pole. He took more photos of the equipment, one of each of the boys, and one of the teachers together. The *wŭshù* boys did some trampoline for him. I thought that all the *wŭshù*s were probably capable of "playing," but today it was only Jīyuán and Huŏjīn that seemed to bring any of that into the space. It seemed that when Cirque Celeste sent its representative to infiltrate China's borders, the *wŭshù* boys were faced with the problem of incorporating such foreign notions as 'playing' and 'having fun' into their very tight and structured regime; notions that bore little resemblance to the arduous and serious physical tasks they had been performing, day in and day out, for well over a year at the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán.

The Wǔshù Boys

It was a typical afternoon at the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán. I sat down on a bench that was brought over to me by Chāo, the juggler, as the *wǔshù* boys were just starting to practice their perch pole act. Jìnpíng, one of the more experienced flyers, began instructing Bái on the Chinese pole, and no matter how well Bái was doing, Jìnpíng hit, smacked, pinched, and pulled him. The two boys moved to the perch poles. Bái missed a catch, and as he tried to climb back up the pole, his shoe ripped the top of Bō's ear. Blood trickled down, but Bō didn't notice until Míngmíng, a base, pointed it out in a reprimand of Bái's error. Bái failed a second time to make the catch. Huǒjīn picked him up with both hands by the neck, dangled him for a minute, put him back down, yanked his head back, pounded him two times in the chest with his fist, then demonstrated the proper way to arch and kick back to fly. Bó'ài then took Bái, made him crouch down, put his left hand behind his back, and then stepped down on his shoulder repeatedly, ripping his ear a good four or five times in an attempt to show him just how not to climb up the perch pole. Then, after Huǒjīn yanked Bái up by the belt, Bó'ài made him watch as he put his own feet down, first the wrong way, and then the right way. Bái wasn't fazed at all by this type of treatment. Even when Huǒjīn picked him up by the neck, he didn't bat an eyelash.

Things had changed for the newest *wǔshù* flyers in the short time that I had been going to the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán. At least that was the case for Bái, who no longer cried in response to the harsh treatment he received from the bases during training time. Up until recently, though, he had been learning with another young boy, Xiàofēng; and Xiàofēng, evidently, had failed to toughen up enough to keep training

the act.[62] Just a few weeks earlier, when Xiàofēng was still on board, I was at the *zájì tuán* on one particular afternoon, when I witnessed the event that triggered my concern about the extent of the physical damage that was being done to the two youngest *wǔshùs*, and the capacity for violence involved in the acrobatic training in China generally.

The *wǔshùs* were dancing on the carpet. A few of the troupe members casually straggled in and out of the building. Xiàofēng was in his usual spot by the Chinese pole. He took off his shirt, and the back of his right shoulder had a blood-covered open wound that was about half the size of his face. Unable to maintain the calm face I had made it a point to don when I witnessed the more violent aspects of training there, I mouthed the words: "Oh my God," and looked over to see Jīyuán staring piercingly at my face, aghast. He got up immediately, and walked over to Liáng Lǎoshī, whispered something in his ear that was apparently compelling enough to urge Liáng Lǎoshī to, uncharacteristically, go over and examine Xiàofēng's gaping wound. By the time Liáng Lǎoshī got to him, Xiàofēng had pulled his shirt back on, but the lime green colour of it, rather than covering up the mess, made the huge blood stain that had soaked his back pop out even more. The bloodstain made the shape of a half-moon that travelled down Xiàofēng's flank, and curled underneath his armpit, trailing off in bright red speckles.

The troupe casually began moving prop boxes from their recent trip to Xiānggǎng (Hong Kong) back into the room, and I thought of the way that Xiàofēng and Bái had looked at me yesterday as they left the training hall with their fathers. I couldn't shake

[62] By the time that the above incident had taken place, Xiàofēng had already ceased to come to the *zájì tuán.*

the fear I thought I saw filling up their eyes. But, realizing it was a mistake to go there right at that moment, I stopped my thoughts dead in their tracks, and tried to compose myself. I looked over at Angúo, who was working with Bái. He pretended to hit and pinch the boy, and then they both smiled. Strange. Never before, in the midst of all the actual violence they had subjected their younger colleagues to, had I witnessed them engage in such a practice. It was only around the same time as their teachers nervously started telling me I couldn't write about any of the physical discipline in training, that they would make believe a hit (usually followed by an angry glare in my direction). I never actually confirmed this, but I was fairly certain that the 'pretend' violence the bases were beginning to use on the flyers was solely for my benefit.

Jìnpíng did a trick on the pole, and I watched the sweat whip off of his face, and slam against anything and everything in its path. Bō made a catch, and the pole let out a loud and mysterious bang-crack. Xiàofēng had pulled himself back together momentarily for training, but got dropped on the Chinese pole. Once again on the ground, he pulled up his pant leg to show Liáng Lǎoshī a huge bruise on his left knee. I tried my best not to look, but as soon as I did, I realized what an understatement that was. Xiàofēng s knee didn't have a huge bruise, it *was* a huge bruise; black, purple, and swollen as big as his face. After Liáng Lǎoshī acknowledged the damage that had been done, Xiàofēng was, once again, back to work. Jìnpíng pretended to hit Xiàofēng on the Chinese pole. Bō threw Bái hard, almost to the ground, and afterwards caringly adjusted his shirt and lines. As much as I tried to avert my eyes, I couldn't help but look over at Xiàofēng. As I did, I could see that, while he worked, Xiàofēng kept trying to un-stick his blood-stain-soaked lime-green shirt from the damp stickiness of his wound.

The extremity of the violence that I witnessed as part of the *wǔshù* boys' training was certainly an exceptional case. They were from a very different *gōngfū* background, and they were learning a new act for Cirque Celeste that they needed to master in an allotted, and relatively short, period of time. Given that this was the case, skills for the perch pole act, which was quite difficult and very dangerous, needed to be internalized by the boys as quickly as possible, not to mention performed at the highest level possible. However, Lì Húa told me that the school in Luòyáng (attached to the Méizhōu troupe) didn't beat the children. What I had been witnessing was, supposedly, specific to the *wǔshù* boys. When I asked Qiǎo once about the fact that, with the *wǔshù* boys, it was the bases rather than the teachers who were inflicting the abuse on the younger flyers, she said it was an unusual situation. She told me that normally it was the teachers who wielded their fists, or in the case of female teachers, long sticks rather than their hands. The male teachers, Qiǎo said, usually hit the students in the face, whereas the female teachers usually hit the students on their bottoms. Both genders kicked. Contrary to what she had told me before, Qiǎo said that she uses the stick sometimes, and, laughing, made sure I knew it was only on their bottoms. The hit would be softer if the mistake was small; the bigger the mistake, the harder the hit, Qiǎo elaborated. But more important than the size of the mistake, she said, was the conscientiousness of the student; a more conscientious student who made bigger mistakes would get hit less frequently, and less hard, than and unfocused student who made smaller mistakes. The less focused student might get hit hard for a small blunder because, for example, they may have been at a great height when the error occurred, or in a dangerous situation when they could have gotten hurt (broken an arm, a leg, or their face). In this case, by physically *hurting*

their students, acrobatics teachers in China believed they actually *helped* them avoid more serious injuries later. Qiǎo told me that a teacher would eventually stop hitting his or her student when the student got it right. Then the teacher might buy the student something nice to eat, or laugh a lot with him or her, as a reward. However, even though physical discipline, like a number of other teaching methods, was an inherent part of acrobatics training in China, virtually everyone I discussed the matter with acknowledged that one teacher compared with another was not the same.

Conclusion: Echoes

In this chapter I have presented ethnography from Méizhōu in order to tease out three main problematic elements of training acrobatics in China for the majority of foreigners who were there on cultural exchange: age, susceptibility to physical discipline, and language ability. Learning young was a critical part of efficient acrobatics training in China. A child's legs and brains were fresh, and teachers could easily discipline them along through the first year when the training was "tough" in the "bitter" world of *zájì*, when many of them did their best (to no avail) to run away. 'Scientific' calculations of repetitions and timing allowed students to progress "quickly." The logic of "*bù dǎ bù cháng cái*" prevailed at *zájì tuán* amongst their youngest initiates, despite preventative laws that had been established against such practices. In the context of the *zájì tuán*, beating was justified as a hush-hush methodology that helped students by hurting them, thus more swiftly developing spatial awareness, conscientiousness, focus, and bodily control in an environment where physical danger was just a misstep away. It also was reputed as the best method to access high skills fast. In this respect, young students were a necessity because their teachers could yell and beat them without a chance of resistance. In a rare case of the

zájì-inexperienced *wǔshù* performers who were training an act for an important show, the necessity of a doubly fast inculcation was evident in the profusion of blood, sweat, and bruises that couldn't be hidden from the anthropologist. All of them – children and *wǔshùs* alike - were learning *zájì* that way, "by power", as Melaku would have said, having first entered into the world of *zájì* without really knowing what *zájì* was, or why they were doing it in the first place.

Kuài diǎnr! Nàme màn! Kuài diǎnr! Bù duì! Kuài diǎnr! Bù liàn bù huì! Bùxíng! Kuài diǎnr! Méiyǒu! Kuài diǎnr! Bù hǎo! Kuài diǎnr! Gàn shénme?! Kuài! Tài gāo le! Duì! Kuài diǎnr! Tài mànle! Hǎo de! Bù hǎo de! Kuài diǎnr! Shénme gàn nǐ?! Kuài diǎnr! Hǎo! Kuài diǎnr! Kuài diǎnr! Kuài diǎnr! Kuài diǎnr! Kuài diǎnr![63] The voices of China's *zájì* teachers still sometimes echo through my skull, making it reverberate with their non-stop orders; orders that were cast towards their young targets in such sharp tones that, I imagined, I would never be able to entirely shake myself free of them. But then I think about the first time I saw the Habesha Jugglers in the 'Foreign Students Hall' of the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics. No teachers were in sight, as they practised to the beats of the rap music blasting from the corner of the room. They were circus performers. They loved circus. They were essentially teaching themselves, and trying to make their own way in the world. And whether it was because they were too old, didn't really speak Mandarin, were culturally problematic, laughed too much, or didn't take orders as well as their Lǎoshī would have liked, as Melaku said, they most certainly were not "learned by power." At least not in China.

[63] Faster! Too slow! Faster! Incorrect! Faster! Not practice, not able to do it! Not okay! Faster! You don't have it! Faster! Not good! Faster! What are you doing?! Fast! Too tall! Correct! Faster! That was too slow! Good one! Not a good one! Faster! What are you doing?! Faster! Good! Faster! Faster! Faster! Faster! Faster! These were key terms that were used by teachers during training their students.

CHAPTER THREE

The Children

Introduction: Fellini and the "*Sūdān de*" (The Sudanese)

In the previous chapter I described some of the aspects of *zájì* training that were problematic for the Habesha Jugglers. After the Habesha Jugglers left for Europe, I spent the remains of my time in China in Shànyì, a small city in the province of Guìxī, with a group of very young acrobats from Sudan who were also there as part of a cultural exchange. Interestingly, the so-called problematic aspects of Chinese acrobatic training were not as problematic for these Sudanese students as they had been for the other African students. In this chapter I will present the alternative ethnographic context of the Sudanese children on *zájì* exchange, and look at how beliefs about their trainability, as well as their receptivity to the training, differed from both the other African circus performers on cultural exchange, and the younger Chinese students who were training in *zájì* in China. This was partly influenced by the fact that Sudan and China have had an extensive history of acrobatics cultural exchanges, dating back to 1971 when the first group of 52 Sudanese came to China to train in Shàopíng for one to two years. Several other groups followed over the years, and there was a Sudanese acrobatic training hall established in Khartoum that followed the Chinese model of training in many respects. As far as it was relayed to me, all acrobats from Sudan at the time of my research had either trained in China, or trained in the Khartoum *tuán* under teachers who had been on one of the *zájì* cultural

exchanges. This shared history was just one of the factors that helped sculpt an environment where the Sudanese were considered more trainable.

The Sudanese group in China was referred to by their Chinese teachers and other 'native' relations as "*Sūdān de*" (Sudanese), rather than "*Fēizhōu.*" This is, I believe, first and foremost, emblematic of a belief in their greater trainability by Chinese standards. In fact, the Sudanese's Chinese teachers were adamant that teaching them was actually the same as teaching Chinese students. Aside from my own teacher, Shān Lǎoshī (who, despite having never instructed them himself, said that teaching African students in general was the same as teaching Chinese students), other teachers who taught the older African students in Huáxīng explained that teaching them was different than teaching the Chinese students. My own observations confirmed what I was told by both sets of teachers: that the older foreigners were taught differently because of the problematic factors of age, physical discipline, and language, that I described in chapter two.

Blue Lighting Magic Land, the property on which the Sudanese children were based, was a rather surreal tourist park attraction in Shànyì. It housed private businesses including a family-owned zoo, restaurant, and the ten-year-old acrobatics troupe associated with the 'Shànyì Centre of Acrobatics', which hosted the Sudanese group during their three-year cultural exchange. I lived with the group in the upstairs of the Chinese restaurant located on the grounds, separate from the Chinese acrobats who "belonged" to the hosting troupe. When I first moved into my room, the conditions of

which were utterly deplorable,[64] I found, amidst the filth that dominated the surroundings, old extra-long silver sparkly fake eyelashes and anal lubricant left under the bed. I was told that they belonged to three drag performers that had stayed there before me. When I say it was like a Chinese Fellini film, I am not exaggerating. There were man made ponds with abandoned swan shaped boats, and multi-coloured metal obstacle courses that one could navigate to get across the pond's disturbingly neon green film covered 'water'. In the evening I often went running on the grounds, and would stop to help feed the lions from a wheelbarrow of chicken carcasses and eggs. There was the sad case of the cheetah that lived there and had chewed off his own paw in an attempt to escape the confines of his ridiculously small cage, and shackles. Fascinating and disturbing all together, the anomaly of spending time at Blue Lighting Magic Land made the abhorrent conditions of our living quarters bearable for the three months I was there. An entire book just describing the mysterious and surprising park grounds, the various elements they contained, and the interesting characters that frequented them, could be written about this fantastical establishment (including the time that a pair of genuine ostrich legs turned up outside my door and sat there for a week before mysteriously disappearing, but that's another story…). Unfortunately, this thesis cannot justify such a tempting digression. So back to Sudanese children on exchange:

[64] Rats ran over me in my sleep, mosquitoes bit my face (even the inside of my nose) each night, the bathroom (whose water did not work) had old feces and urine in the toilet (that must have been sitting there for an eternity), along with mold covering everything, there were holes in the walls, dirt over everything, it was unbearably hot (no a/c, fans, or open windows during mid-summer), and there were massive indentations in the mattress. I am generally not at all picky nor a diva about these things, but the conditions were unlike any that I've ever stayed in before. The Sudanese children's rooms were decidedly better, but not by much. Even Chinese reporters who were doing a story on the exchange commented to me about how decrepit and unsanitary the Sudanese' living conditions were, but then asked me not to write about the fact that they said that.

Daily training for the Sudanese took place about a five-minute walk through the overgrown wooded pathways passed the four metre high black metal spider sculptures of Blue Lighting Magic Land, in the open cement courtyard of the Chinese acrobatics troupe members' living quarters. They tumbled on very thin mats, and trained all day no matter what extremes the temperatures may have reached in either direction, unless it was raining very hard, in which case they would practice in the nearby 'Acrobatics Play Hall'. The 'Acrobatics Play Hall' was a round indoor theatre where daily acrobatics performances were held by the Chinese troupe that lived there for the public's enjoyment.

The sixteen Sudanese children on exchange when I was there had five primary teachers. Three of them were Chinese acrobatics teachers: the charismatic and brutish Kuàng Lǎoshī (their main coach), Dèng Lǎoshī and Yì Lǎoshī. Their other two teachers were brought over from Sudan. First there was Abdul, an ex-acrobat who had trained in China on the first cultural exchange in the 1970s, and was back again as a teacher for the Sudanese kids, of whom his daughter, Leila, was one. He had performed in a handful of countries around the Middle East, and Africa, and he once told me that the groups' ideal goal in terms of performance was to make it to the U.S. (a goal that was shared by the Habesha Jugglers and the Kenyans). He was convinced that achieving that goal would be impossible, however, due to looming visa restrictions. Abdul was often present in body at the acrobatic training sessions (although his mind seemed to be somewhere else the majority of the time), and sometimes even coached the children a bit. Huda, known to the children as "Mama

Huda," was the third female teacher from Sudan to accompany the group in China.[65] Without prior experience in the acrobatics world, she taught the kids (rather informally) math, Islam, and Arabic. Importantly, she served as a maternal, protective figure for the troupe, looking out for them as much as possible given the language and cultural barriers she faced. Huda only spoke Arabic,[66] and, due to religious reasoning, was not supposed to leave the grounds of Blue Lightning Magic Land without the company of Abdul or the kids. She became a fantastic friend and ally to me.

Out of all of the African groups on *zájì* exchange, the Sudanese had the most cultural buffers, by which I mean the following factors: two teachers from their home country who assisted with mediation and protection, daily classes in Islam and Arabic, Sudanese-style Halal food (well, as Sudanese-style as it gets in China: foul, *shāo bǐng* [flat unleavened bread] with no filling, eggs, and sometimes halal meat) cooked for them by an employee of Blue Lightning Magic Land, and living quarters which were separate from the Chinese teachers and which, by Shaaban's standards, counted as a "free place" from where one could come and go as he or she pleased (except for Huda). These conditions were quite variable from those of the Habesha Jugglers and the Kenyans who were required to bend much more to the strict rules of the Huáxīng School, and were without any Ethiopian or Kenyan teachers who would advocate on their behalf should it be necessary. However, the Sudanese children were also very young, which enabled them to become fluent in Mandarin in a very short period of time, and they already had a foundation of a Sudanese version of China's *zájì* at

[65] Huda made me aware that the first two female teachers had experienced physical violence at the hands of Abdul, and went back to Sudan. Huda, who didn't take any s#!t from anyone, had developed an extremely distant relationship with Abdul, and had the kids on her side most all of the time.
[66] Huda only spoke Arabic, so the children would have to translate for us. I would speak to them in less than ideal Mandarin, and they would translate it into Arabic for Huda. Despite the fact that the kids were fluent in Mandarin, and Huda had identified the most capable and effective translators for her usage, misunderstandings were still the norm.

home. Compared with the Habesha Jugglers and the Kenyans, they were therefore initiated into China's acrobatics world in a way that was much closer to that of the 'natives'.

Selection

Abdul told me one afternoon over a *haram* (forbidden in Arabic) warm beer that as preparation for the exchange, two of the Chinese teachers from the troupe had travelled to Sudan to hand pick the original ten children who would be coming to Shànyì to train for three years. They even went back again to select six more to come part way through the exchange and join the first group. This was not protocol, Abdul told me; the Chinese did not do this with the Ethiopians or the Kenyans, or anyone else, he said. Abdul told me that before, when he had trained in China, it had been normal for the teachers to check, and examine, a potential student to make sure he or she was suitable to train *zájì*. Now, he said, anyone could learn *zájì*, just so long as they had the money to pay for it.[67] But, unlike the breadth of the selection process, Abdul said the instruction methods in China hadn't changed so much over the years since he had learned. He began to mumble in Mandarin under his tipsy breath, and although I couldn't really understand what he was saying, his gestures spoke a thousand words. Abdul shovelled and chopped the air around him, performing a pretend game of hard labour in the empty space of my dank and musty room. As he drifted off, temporarily, into his own nostalgic world of hard work, repeating the phrase "*liàngōng*" (practice) over and over again while hammering the air with his fist, I also began to lose myself in an imaginative world of my own.

[67] In China, parents could pay for their children to study *zájì,* whether or not they had been dubbed as having the natural potential for it.

Foreign Youth

It was a typical training day in Blue Lightning Magic Land, and Kuàng Lǎoshī was teaching the Sudanese boys hat juggling in the courtyard. He kept hitting their backs very hard. Some of the boys started to laugh. Others were clearly trying not to. I never saw a Chinese acrobat of any age laugh during training, I thought. One of the boys began to cry. Then he stood up. Kuàng Lǎoshī yelled even harder. The other boys stared at him. Kuàng Lǎoshī hit the crying boy's back twice as hard as before, and he cried even more. Abdul stood at a distance, watching. I wondered what he was thinking. One of the boys, Imad, was having difficulty doing a flip. Kuàng Lǎoshī spotted his movement, and then deliberately twisted his elbow in the process. Abdul came over. Sometimes he talked more gently in Arabic to the kids. Kuàng Lǎoshī hit one of the boy's knees. He flinched. Kuàng Lǎoshī yanked him. Imad met him with fuming eyes, full of resistance and anger. *"Nǐ gàn shénme?"* (What are you doing?) Kuàng Lǎoshī barked. Anger was in all of the boys' eyes; silent anger that spoke loudly. Even in their silence, they were not compliant. Imad's tears rolled down his cheeks. The other boys stared at him, it seemed to me, in support. The next time he flipped, he fell on his head, strained his neck, and cried harder. Kuàng Lǎoshī reacted: *"Wǒ shuō kuài diǎnr! Wǒ shénme jiào nǐ?... Liàn hěn kǔ*" (I said quick! What did I teach you?... Training is bitter). It felt as if he was trying to make it even harder for Imad just to prove a point about how bitter training was. Eventually the tears disappeared. I walked away with the sense that the Sudanese kids had each other's backs. They definitely weren't Chinese.

For the Sudanese kids, learning acrobatics in China didn't always entail their silence, though, resistant though it may have been. The most remarkable differences I

observed between them and the Chinese kids who trained, were threefold: the sneaky ways they attempted to avoid training, how much they played when they were supposed to be being serious, and how vocal they were (both in Mandarin and Arabic). For example, I was sitting in the 'Acrobatics Play Hall' with Huda who, dressed all in black, looked like a judge. Kuàng Lǎoshī wandered around the space, aimlessly, like a ghost who was pulled by some invisible force that no one but he could see. He walked, stopped, and stared into the darkness. At what, I didn't know. Sometimes he was compelled to yell out into the empty space surrounding him: *"kuài diǎnr!"* (Faster!) at no one in particular. He didn't seem to be watching anyone. When he sat down, it was on stage right, and out of anyone's view, so that when he said anything to the boys on stage, it was only his voice that they were met with. Jamila, a highly skilled hand-balancer with a chronic wrist injury, was balancing on blocks, doing one-arm handstands on her injured wrist. She just stood there, completely still, whenever she had the opportunity; whenever no one was watching. At one point, she went behind the seats, and sat down for a while, hidden. I tried not to watch her so that none of the teachers would follow my eyes and find her secret hiding place. Jamila emerged later, carrying a single block. She walked over to the other blocks, put the new one on top, and then slowly rearranged them before disappearing again. After some time, she came back out with a diablo, and stood there for a while, just holding it, before she gave it a go. No one seemed to notice that she had kept disappearing.

On another occasion, the Chinese teachers were on one side of the courtyard and Abdul was on the other. Khadija, a talented tumbler with lots of explosive power, was doing handstand push-ups, and vacillated between laughing and crying as she worked. A black car drove up, and a Chinese man got out. He gathered the teachers together,

and they left for a meeting. The kids, who were supposed to be training, quickly disbanded from their routine, and chaos began to break loose. The girls wandered off into the fields, picking fruit, which they ate and freely gave away. I sat with the boys by the props' shed, where they climbed and played with, and on, anything they could get their hands on, causing all sorts of trouble. One of the boys, Maalik, began spray painting on the props with a yellow paint. They tried, for a brief moment, to wipe the spray paint off the can. It didn't work. Unfazed by the failure of their 'effort', they gave up and moved on to better and brighter things. They asked me if there was gun fighting in the U.S. The teachers came back out, and the boys quickly pretended to be doing their training.

Words and Power

Another way that the Sudanese kids' receptivity to *zájì* training differed from that of Chinese students was the way they often vocally expressed their excitement about doing a trick well, and wanted their Lǎoshī to see the improvements they had made. *"Lǎoshī, kàn zhège jiémù!"* (Teacher, look at this show!) – a phrase I had never heard coming from the typically silent Chinese students - could often be heard on a good day in the courtyard in Shànyì. There was another way in which the kids used their voices during training that set them apart from the Chinese students. Sometimes, as is evident below, even though most of them were fluent in Mandarin, depending upon the situation, they tactfully spoke in Arabic.

It was incredibly hot outside as the sun's heat pulsed down on us from above. Some of the boys were outside in the courtyard, working on handstands. Others were doing hat juggling training in the only corner with shade. Two Chinese women, whom I had

never met, came up to me, and started asking questions. They were schoolteachers who had come to see the afternoon performance. My brief answers appeased the verbal sense of their curiosity, and they stood next to me in silence, blatantly staring at the Sudanese kids training. Feeling embarrassed because this wasn't a public performance, I pulled out my mobile, and pretended to write a text so I could create some distance from them and the uncomfortable feeling that their stares generated in me. One of the Sudanese kids said something in Chinese, and the women repeated it to her companion, which caused the twosome to burst out laughing. Not long afterwards, they left and an old man with brown bucked teeth and a blue construction hat took their place as a shameless spectator. He smoked heavily; dangling a cigarette through the stupidest grin I could ever imagine seeing. The man stood, literally, right in the face of Imad, who was sweating, juggling, and repeatedly dropping his caps at the feet of this uninvited 'gentleman' spectator. Imad dropped another cap – the straw that broke the camel's back - and swiftly turned to the man, growling something in Arabic that I couldn't understand (but could definitely imagine the meaning of). The man, rather than backing away, sat down next to me, wide as ever smile on his face, as if we were partners in crime. I got up right away, and started walking out of the courtyard. Kuàng Lǎoshī called me back over. I took his invitation. He talked warmly with me for a few minutes, and before we knew it, Abdul had joined us. I looked over, and saw that the anonymous Chinese man was still sitting and staring in stupidity at Imad's skills with the cap, but was distracted by Kuàng Lǎoshī, who pinched, hard, the back of Shad's arm, and dragged him over to train, trumpeting *"kuài diǎnr!"* as Shad slowly put on his knee guards. After a few minutes, the teachers momentarily left the courtyard. The boys immediately began to horse around, but always keeping one eye out for the inevitable return of their strict Lǎoshī.

Training Like a Native

In China, the teachers never beat the Habesha Jugglers or the Kenyans. At first I thought this was due to the combined factors of their age (they were older) and their status as foreigners. After I met the Sudanese acrobats, however, I could quite safely say that the latter reason probably didn't play much of a part at all because physical discipline was a regular factor in the Sudanese kids' training regime. The physical discipline that was inflicted upon the Sudanese kids provided a solid example of the average amount of beating that happened during acrobatic training, much more so than the extreme violence of the *wǔshù* boys at the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán.

I was sitting in the sweltering hot 'Acrobatics Play Hall,' watching the Sudanese kids participate in their afternoon rehearsal. Their only female teacher, Dèng Lǎoshī, was standing in the hollow cave-like space underneath the risers with Abdul, Kuàng Lǎoshī, and two other Chinese men who I didn't know. She was screeching (much more than usual) in a fast Mandarin that was directed at Abdul. Looking frustrated to say the least, Abdul walked away and then returned, waving his arms angrily as he yelled back at her. After a few minutes, with no resolution to this mysterious conflict in sight, the men eventually left without Dèng Lǎoshī, who stubbornly declined to budge. Instead, to my surprise, she stood there and cried, wiped her face with a tissue, and then began tearing little pieces off of it and throwing them to the ground. At the end of practice, Abdul, who had returned, and Dèng Lǎoshī shook hands, quasi-amicably, by the door. That evening, Huda, Jamila, and Yasmin, one of the other girls, came to my room. I hadn't seen Jamila train that afternoon, so I asked them if everything was okay. She was okay, they told me, but apparently one of the teachers had hit her very hard because Jamila wanted to rest.

When I went to see the training the following morning, Huda was there, and said she would come in the afternoon as well. Although she didn't say it outright, I assumed she was there looking out for Jamila after what had happened. From what I was able to tell, Huda only ever came to watch the training when she felt there to be a particular need for her to look out for the well-being of one or all of the children. As I observed the training, my mind drifted. I looked at the kids, and imagined their futures; how they would be when they grew up, whom they would marry, the kinds of people they would grow into. I thought I could see the future in all of them. I certainly saw hope. Maybe this experience was going to give them more of an opportunity than I had imagined. Maybe China was helping them, in its own way. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be a child again. I watched the way they played at every opportunity, unabashedly, near the fountain, in, through, and with, the water that furiously spouted out and into the heavy humid air of China. There was no thought of tomorrow. They were completely in the moment. They were completely alive; nothing more, nothing less. I felt jealous of them, but at the same time, in them I found a profound sense of hope, not just for their own lives, but also for mine. And as the morning training ended, I noticed that Dèng Lǎoshī hadn't shown up.

I left with Huda, and after we got back home, she tried to vent to me about what had happened to Jamila the day before. Dèng Lǎoshī had dragged Jamila across the floor. Due to the language barriers between us Huda couldn't tell me exactly why, but she could tell me, through words and gestures, that Jamila was crying terribly afterwards. She was hyperventilating. She wanted to go home to Sudan. She wanted her Mama and Baba. Huda said that Abdul just sat there, without doing anything. She pointed to

her head, and said that his wasn't good. She promised to have Yasmin translate better for me later. Jamila was beautiful, I said, and Huda passionately agreed. She said her chair balancing was beautiful. Huda was clearly, and understandingly, infuriated by what had happened. I asked if acrobatics teachers in Sudan did these kinds of things, but she didn't know.

Later that night, Jamila and Yasmin came to my room. Yasmin's back was injured, so I gave her ointment, and a small massage. I asked her what, exactly, had happened with Dèng Lǎoshī. The girls told me that Jamila had been doing handstand pike ups, and she was too slow, too tired, and didn't do enough. She wanted to rest. Dèng got very upset, and dragged Jamila across the floor by the arm. Huda was not happy about the whole matter, but Abdul hadn't said a thing about it, the girls said. They began complaining about how the teachers hit them in China. When I asked, they said they were hit a little in Sudan (and gestured small hits with an imaginary stick), but it just wasn't the same. Here, Dèng Lǎoshī, for example, used the sharp point of her high heels to kick them, and Kuàng Lǎoshī grabbed Jamila's upper arm, digging his nails into it, hard. They were hit very hard, indeed, in China. But the difference, I gathered, wasn't just about the pressure.

All of the Sudanese kids' teachers told me that teaching African students was the same as teaching Chinese students, which ran contrary to what Dōng Lǎoshī at the Huáxīng school meant when he explained he had to "change (his) mind" so that he could "listen to their culture" with Habesha Jugglers and the Kenyans. But, unlike what I witnessed in Huáxīng, the Sudanese children *were* trained very much like their Chinese counterparts, and the investment from their teachers was also a much greater

one. The teacher/student relationship involved greater 'intimacy' because some of the 'differences', and therefore the 'distances' between the Sudanese students and their Chinese teachers were all but removed from the equation: the children spoke Mandarin as their teachers did, they had a 'shared history' from long term participation in the *zájì* exchanges, and the teachers felt entitled to lay their hands on the Sudanese students in a similar capacity to how they did with their Chinese students.

Even though in China the Sudanese were more obviously trainable by local standards than the other African students on cultural exchange, the children's receptivity to the training did not, in all ways, match that of the younger native students in China. The Sudanese students hid during training, ran around when their teachers weren't looking, and used Arabic during moments of resistance; these were all typical occurrences in Blue Lighting Magic Land. When a Chinese teacher went too far with physical discipline, Jamila had a cultural buffer to turn to in Huda, who was there to have her back, at least emotionally, and I never witnessed this kind of resistance amongst Chinese students. In a situation like that, the power dynamics of physical violence in training were reframed by the context of the cultural exchange, and even a young Jamila knew that physical discipline in China wasn't the same as it was at the acrobatics troupe in Sudan. Other cultural buffers cushioned the troupe's time in China, including 'Sudanese' food, classes in Islam and Arabic, and the open doors of the "free place" in which they lived. These buffers shifted the dynamic of the outside/in racism they faced in Shànyì, which came frequently from outside members of the public who frequented the amusement park on a daily, but it did not quell its

oppressive, symbolically violent Gaze (Foucault 1979), of which the children were still acutely aware.

The Audition

Despite the 'bitterness' of Chinese acrobatic training, the Sudanese students - much like the Habesha Jugglers, the Kenyans, and the Chinese acrobats I knew - were looking to circus and *zájì* as a "way" to a better life for themselves and their families. This was brought to the forefront when Circus of Africa's Nelson decided to reach out to them, before I had any idea that I would be touring with his circus in the relatively near future. It was a hot and heavy summer's day in Blue Lighting Magic Land. I was winding my way through one of the many small and hidden paths that navigated the Fellini-esque-pseudo-amusement-park, when Abdul waved me over to the side of the main square's fountain to watch the young acrobats give their daily performance. As the two of us waited for an overly-enthusiastic M.C. to introduce the rare breed of "*Sūdān de*" acrobats who were going to perform for the scanty crowd of ten or so customers loitering around the fountain, I told Abdul that I had received notice from Ras that the director of Circus of Africa would come to China in two weeks' time. Through Ras, Nelson knew that I was in Shànyì with the Sudanese group, and he had asked me to organize an audition because Nelson would want to see the Sudanese kids' acts in hopes of eventually bringing them to Europe to perform, I said. I added that we should definitely prepare a good show for him.

Abdul had met the Habesha Jugglers at the China-Africa Forum in Běijīng six months prior to this conversation, but this was the first time he was hearing about Circus of Africa and, with it, the concrete possibility of performing abroad. Abdul's immediate

reaction was, surprisingly to me, fairly resistant. On top of that (or maybe it was because of that), I couldn't be quite sure how much he had understood of what I'd said. I note this for various reasons: firstly, we communicated primarily in very basic and choppy Mandarin with a few mutually understood English and Arabic words thrown in; secondly, as I got to know Abdul better, I realized that he was much better at pretending he understood things said in Chinese than he was at actually understanding them; thirdly, because of what he would later tell Huda and the kids about going abroad; and fourthly, because Abdul spent more of his leisure time in China working on his drinking skills than he did on his language skills. One thing became clear, however – the more I talked about the possibility of their getting a European contract, the longer Abdul's list of demands got.

First Abdul told me that the kids would only be able to perform for three months at a time. I said that I wasn't sure exactly what Nelson had in mind, but it could be more along the lines of a six-month period. Abdul paused for a minute, deep in thought. Okay, he conceded, but for every two months 'on', they would need at least ten days of rest. And he said, repeatedly and emphatically, that it would be absolutely unacceptable for just two or three people from the group to go alone to Europe: that it must be all, or none. Attempting to turn the defensive tone of the conversation into a more productive one, I asked him if they had any Sudanese music or costumes with them in China because when the kids performed, they always used so-called Chinese style costume and music. After my fieldwork, I watched some video footage of a post-China performance they put on in Khartoum, and they still used a 'Chinese' style (with the exception of hijab, which was worn by the girls during the performance in Sudan, as well as the China-Africa Forum in Běijīng [but not elsewhere when

performing in China]). But even at that time I was sure, I explained to Abdul, that a so-called 'Sudanese' style would be what Nelson was looking for. Abdul expressed clear unhappiness with this request, mentioning that acrobatics, and acrobatic music, were not 'Chinese', or "Sudanese', but rather, transcendent of culture altogether. "It's *circus* music," he said, and then told me that they wouldn't have them until after the 30th of the month when some of the parents were supposed to fly from Khartoum to China for a visit. As we continued talking about Nelson's impending arrival, I felt as if I was in the midst of heated negotiations with Abdul over the concrete specifics of a contract; it was as if the troupe had already been hired, and we were just ironing out the tedious details, rather than the truth of the matter, which was that Nelson wanted a glimpse of them in order to know if they had the potential to become enough of a lucrative endeavour for him to take on. The lucky opportunity that this presented, however, did not seem to elicit any signs of gratitude, hope, or excitement from Abdul. Not that it necessarily should have, but I was surprised, nonetheless, at the absence of those reactions, and I was, all at once, put off and impressed by the sense of stubborn demand and entitlement he was giving off. Clearly, this approach was at least partly responsible for the Sudanese having secured the specific conditions they had at Blue Lighting Magic Land. I had to wonder if it wasn't also a factor in why acrobats from his troupe in Sudan hadn't branched out more internationally, at least in terms of Europe and the United States.

A few days later, the tune of Bon Jovi's 'It's My Life' was blasting out of one of the Sudanese boy's Gameboy, and a hijab-free Huda sang along to the hard rockin' lyrics, unabashedly, and without a clue to their meaning. The three of us – Huda, Shad, and myself - were sitting in Huda's room, talking about the possibility of going to Europe.

Above and beyond any obvious translation difficulties (or translation 'adventures', as I preferred to refer to them), it became apparent that Huda thought that some members of the group would definitely be going to Europe in just two weeks time. I suspected that she had tried to get information about Nelson's upcoming visit from Abdul, but because they had a very tenuous and untrustworthy relationship, he hadn't given her the entire picture: he told her that Nelson was going to take the best seven out of their group to Europe to perform. With twelve year-old Shad as our translator (Mandarin to Arabic and back again), I explained to Huda that Nelson would be coming to see the kids audition for him, and that Europe would be more of a long-term future possibility that would involve the entire group (if it progressed at all, that was). After hearing this, she seemed relieved, and began to lose herself in fantasizing about possibilities that the opportunity presented them with. We sat in a dreamy silence for a while, punctuated by various moments of her romanticizing about us all going back to Sudan together, then moving on to perform in Europe one day. I couldn't help but think about the irony here - the two of us barely being capable of communication with one another unassisted, and yet this fantasy of escape was one that seemed easily translatable; the notion of escaping present day circumstances by imaginatively accessing increasing opportunities (geographic and economic in particular), walked hand-in-hand with the exciting and scary reality of an unsure future that is an integral part of the 'circus life'. Participants on acrobatic cultural exchange in China were faced with this reality every day, and it was consistently alluded to by almost all of my interlocutors in the field, whether they were *in* China, Europe, or Ethiopia, and whether they were *from* Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania, or South Africa. This was also a reality that, given the course that my fieldwork was beginning to take, I could relate to quite a bit myself. We were, indeed, living in the clouds of possibility. Hand-

in-hand with the Habesha Jugglers, Kenyans, and Chinese acrobats in the field, the Sudanese troupe was looking towards making better lives for themselves and their families back home, and when then opportunity to audition for Nelson arrived, fantasies of escaping into a "way" that might bring them closer to that place, abounded.

"Ripe"

As the time for the audition drew closer, I received a late-night telephone call from Nelson while I was in Shànyì. He was calling me from Huáxīng, where he had been purchasing props for his acrobatics school in Tanzania (the 'No Worries Academy of African Acrobats' in Dar Es Salaam) with Dōng Lǎoshī's help via the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics. Nelson excitedly told me that he seemed to think that the Sudanese acrobats could have a great international future traveling the world as circus performers, and, of course, he wanted to be the first to bring them to Europe. He had the idea to create an all-Sudanese circus – the first of its kind – to tour Germany. Two years previously he paid a visit to their training hall in Khartoum to scout out promising acrobatic talent. The acrobats practising there at the time, who had also been trained in China, were very good, but a bit too old. That said, Nelson could have brought two of them to Europe to perform with Circus of Africa but they had kids, families, etc. that kept them tied to Sudan. Earlier in their careers when they were freed of grown-up obligations and were "ripe" for the picking (in terms of their acrobatics skills being at peak level) as Nelson put it, unfortunately it just hadn't been the "right time" for African acrobats in Europe. Now was different, however; an outbreak of "African Fever" - the growing market desire in Europe for 'African' circus - was changing everything.

Missed Opportunities

During our initial phone call when he was in Huáxīng, Nelson told me that he would call the night before he was coming to see the kids, but on the scheduled evening I heard nothing from him. The following morning, when he was supposed to be there, I called him. No answer. A few hours later, I called again. Still no answer. I decided that, even though it didn't look promising, we should still prepare for his arrival. I knew that Nelson was in contact with Dōng Lǎoshī though the artists he represented who had trained in China (i.e., the Habesha Jugglers, the first group of Ethiopians, Jina), and Dōng Lǎoshī had arranged the construction of the props Nelson wanted, as well as having been hosting Nelson for the short while he was in China. Eventually I called Dōng, who told me that Nelson was still with him in Huáxīng, fast asleep. So it was from the mouth of Dōng that I heard that Nelson probably wasn't going to be coming - maybe "the second time", Dōng said vaguely. A little while later, Nelson called, and said that he still intended to come to Shànyì - just a few days later than he had originally planned. He said that on Sunday, he would go to Běijīng to change his ticket back to Germany to allow enough time for a visit to Shànyì. I asked him to please tell me if there was still the possibility that he wasn't going to come, because these were small kids he was going to be letting down. I said that I understood if he was too busy to make it down here, but that it would be harder for them to understand, given that I had been telling them about his visit for some time. He was very apologetic, and said that he would definitely be coming to Shànyì – maybe the day after tomorrow, he said. This was his job, Nelson explained to me – to travel to many different countries looking for new African talent.[68] I said I would wait to hear from

[68] Nelson told me he had scouted for circus artists in as many as sixteen different countries in Africa.

him tomorrow. Of course, he would never call.[69] Given all of the preparation for the audition, Nelson's no-show was a prime example of how in the circus business, nothing is ever certain until it happens. Even the signing of a contract can be meaningless if financial backing and/or visa arrangement falls through. Tied to this was the fact that Nelson, as described to me by a perceptive Ras, was "quick" like a "shark" with business opportunities. Oftentimes he took on more than he could handle, and as a result was notoriously late for coming back to the Circus of Africa tour when he had been away on business[70] and as I have shown, missed out on other opportunities altogether.

Many months after Nelson's no-show to audition the Sudanese troupe in Shànyì, and shortly after my arrival in Germany for Circus of Africa's tour, Nelson invited me into his 'office' of the day[71] to tell me that he would soon be making a trip to his school in Tanzania. On his way back to Europe he wanted to pay a visit to the Sudanese kids in Khartoum, and he wanted me to try and contact them to see if they were already back from China. I said I didn't know whether or not the group had gone back to Sudan because, while I was still in China with them, their expected return date was always under debate; no one really ever knew when they would be returning, or even who or what would determine that fact (i.e., whether it was the Chinese Ministry of Culture, the leaders of the Shànyì Centre of Acrobatics, the leader of the acrobatics troupe in Sudan, someone else, or a combination of some or all of them, was never

[69] Interestingly, on the day that Nelson was supposed to come see the audition, the Sudanese kids wore the same style shirts ('Beijing Dancing Institute') worn by the *wǔshù* boys in Méizhōu on the day that Tom from Cirque Celeste came to check on them.
[70] For example, if he was expected to come back to the tour on Thursday, this really meant that he could show up to a week or two later without explanation.
[71] Since we moved daily on the tour, Nelson's 'office' changed depending on the venue we were at, and on whether or not he was with us that day (he frequently went abroad for business purposes).

clear to me).[72] This was important "business," Nelson continued, because if the group was still in China, Nelson's having not seen and signed them yet wouldn't be a problem because, "no one will take them (from China)"; but if they had already made it back to Sudan, there was the danger that someone else (i.e., another agent) may "take them" from Khartoum. He began talking about the last time he had visited Sudan looking for acrobats, and how they were still doing a style that the Chinese had been doing "forever" (well, for decades at least). Everyone has seen that style before, Nelson said, emphasizing the point that if someone wants to keep up with this business, they must constantly change what they're doing. This is where he saw himself fitting in. Nelson would want to change the Sudanese kids' Chinese-style acts because, as he put it to me, "that's what I do" – take what a person has and changes it. Nelson said that part of his motivation for implementing a more 'African' style was that he didn't want his artists' acts to be "just a copy of the Chinese" acts; he wanted them, interestingly enough, to be "their own." I told him about the performance 'requirements' that Abdul had laid out for me in China. Nelson just smirked and said: "It doesn't work like that."

Nelson's expertise in changing African circus performers' Chinese style acts to make them more of "their own," was met with Abdul's international inexperience, which became quickly apparent. When I confronted him later, I found out that Abdul had told the entire group of children that only seven of them would be going to Europe without the others. He defended this lie to me by justifying it as a motivational tactic for the kids to train harder. However much Abdul may have longed for the group to make it to Europe and the U.S. to perform one day, even using questionably unethical

[72] This was not dissimilar to the cases of the Habesha Jugglers and the Kenyan group in Huáxīng.

motivational tactics in order to make it happen, his resistance to being flexible about aligning himself and the troupe with whatever the cultural demands that Nelson and a Sudanese-style circus tour may have placed on them, put up a clear red flag. Even though the Sudanese may have been "ripe" for the picking in the time of "African Fever," cultural malleability was an essential ingredient in Nelson's "business" of "taking them"; and without it, things just "didn't work like that."

Nelson never made it over to Sudan while I was on tour with Circus of Africa, but I often wonder how Abdul and the Sudanese kids would have fared under the circumstances of touring in Europe. When I do, I tend to find that my mind drifts off and remembers a particular day at Blue Lightning Magic Land. It was several days after I had sat at the fountain performance with Abdul, when he had met the proposal of an audition for Nelson with a list of demands, and told me that acrobatics, and acrobatic music, were not 'Chinese' or "Sudanese' but, rather, transcendent of culture altogether. I was walking by that same spot, and the Sudanese kids were in the midst of their daily performance. As I moved past the square, I noticed that everything was proceeding in the normal fashion - everything save for one tiny little detail. The music was different. Rather than the Chinese music that typically accompanied the children's acts, my ears met the sound of a lone Sudanese voice calling out in Arabic into the endless thick of the Shànyì summer heat. It was such a small difference that at the time, it barely registered with me. But when I look back on it now, the significance is unmistakable. Nelson was right when he told me that day that it didn't "work like that." He was right. It didn't. In order to be one of Nelson's "artists," African circus performers had to be willing to bend themselves – corporeally, geographically, and 'culturally' – to be a part of the show.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the alternative ethnographic context of the Sudanese children on *zájì* exchange in Shànyì, and claimed that beliefs about their trainability, as well as their receptivity to the training, differed from both the other African circus performers on cultural exchange, and from younger Chinese students who were training *zájì*. The political obligation of the troupes that were involved in the exchanges to contribute to the corporeal development of African students ran into conflict with a methodological approach to "bitter" acrobatic training (Farrell 2007), the logic of which depended on children's bodies being more easily subject to physical discipline, quicker to learn, and able to perform over a longer period of time before early retirement. However, the hand picked bodies of Sudanese students proved to be relatively trainable in these regards, and their Chinese teachers were able to see beyond their 'biological differences of race' towards the facts of their age, Mandarin language ability, and already established *zájì* foundation in Khartoum. "High level high money"[73] was still a possibility for the youthful Sudanese in the eyes of their Chinese teachers, but their relative trainability did not necessarily guarantee a complete submission to the process of training like it would have a 'native'. Playfulness, periodic sneaking off, and deploying Arabic language as a form of resistance in the face of "power" during practice, were specific ways that the Sudanese children engaged in processes of subversive self-fashioning (Greenblatt 1980) that would mark them as separate from their more so-called docile (Foucault 1984: 179-187) Chinese counterparts, even though the rules of training still applied.

[73] See chapter four.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Agents

Introduction: Mediators

This chapter marks a departure from the ethnographic vignettes of the first three chapters, which have all been set in China and have related to acrobatic training amongst the various groups that were present during my fieldwork. As the median of the thesis, it is only appropriate then that this chapter focuses on the middlemen and women that were central players in the careers of the Habesha Jugglers, and other circus performers around the world: circus agents and managers. Agents like Nelson were an essential resource for circus performers to have access to. The majority of time, without an agent or a manager, it would be incredibly difficult (although certainly not impossible) to advance one's career in the international circus world very far at all. This was as pertinent for performers who came from countries that were economically disadvantaged and/or had poor international political relations, as it was for performers who were not adept in either English or another circus-heavy European language such as French. Because agents were middlemen and women, they connected performers to shows that were looking for new and innovative high-level acts. Many times these larger shows only found acts through certain agents, and the relationship between the company and the agent became just as important as the relationship between the agent and the performer.

The circus agents I met in the field had the responsibility to provide quality performances for the companies they supplied talent to, and simultaneously ensured that the artists they represented or contracted out were given "good conditions" and just compensation (in theory anyway). Forming strong, long-term relationships on all sides was integral to success in the profession. Contracts that involved international movements also required the capacity for an agent to be culturally flexible in working with individuals or groups whose operational experiences were different. The ability to read the logic of a market (native and/or foreign) was another critical skill for those in the business. The way that one country's performers operated quite often varied tremendously from another's, and unless an agent knew how to prevent issues arising in a multi-cultural scenario, they would be sure to encounter more large-scale problems because of it. Often it was helpful for an agent to work with artists with whom they shared a common 'culture' or 'history'.

In this chapter, I present case studies of three different agents who were working with performers I knew - Zhihuán, Qiǎo, and Nelson - and develop their stories ethnographically in a way that unpacks the fundamental strategies they deployed that engendered success (or a lack of it) in their field. The first, Zhihuán, worked for AACB, the agency that handled the *wǔshù* boys' perch pole act that was contracted between Cirque Celeste and the Méizhōu Zájì Tuán. The second agent I present is Qiǎo, who quite disastrously, as I describe in the chapter, hired the Habesha Jugglers to perform for her in Luòyáng. Lastly, Nelson's case, whose ultimate aim it was to handle all the African circus talent that was moving around the globe, unfolds on the page in relation to the Sudanese children I treated in chapter three. I claim that by having both the 'cultural' knowledge, and knowledge of the market, good circus

agents effectively became the mediators who could theoretically lead the way "out to freedom" that "a good life" entailed, and which the Habesha Jugglers and my other interlocutors spoke of and desired. Although for circus spectators, agents were invisible forces behind the circus performers who occupied the arena stages, in the ethnographic contexts of these three case studies, the primacy of the role of the agent comes to the forefront, and imbalances of power become clear in what is ultimately a search for economic gain in a spectacular playing field where the "market decides" who profits and how.

Zhihuán

AACB was a Chinese company[74] that worked under the Ministry of Culture in Běijīng, and dealt solely with Chinese performances that travelled abroad. Globally, they exclusively handled supplying talent to all international large-scale productions. Within China, they worked with both private and state troupes, and said that the rules for working with both were generally the same. I was lucky enough to spend a little bit of time with the company's vice-president, Zhihuán, a long and lanky balding man with a snake-like stance, whose sharp insight and quick-witted irony were coupled with a surprising mysteriousness that immediately intrigued me. The two of us sat across from each other at a round wooden table in a conference office in which the only other significant furnishing was a very big TV.

Zhihuán had worked for AACB for ten of the fifty years it had been in existence. Having had no other experience with *zájì* (or any other performance genre at all, for that matter), he fell into this work, as he put it to me, after studying English at

[74] I never really understood if AACB was 100 percent state-run, or part state-run and part privatized. Zhihuán and another employee told me both things at different times throughout this interview.

university. He explained that AACB was established before China's so-called opening, as the one and only mediating office with the authority to deal with troupes that intended to perform abroad (and that were supposed to go through the Ministry of Culture in order to do so). Now things had changed, however, and there were numerous other companies with which the troupes could also work.[75] AACB worked with all kinds of performing arts (Peking opera, music, dance, and acrobatics), but *zájì* was decidedly the most popular art form sold on the "international market." More than ninety percent of AACB's performances going abroad were *zájì*, and *mǎxì* oriented. The U.S. audience simply didn't buy tickets to see Peking opera, which didn't appeal so much outside of China because of the foreignness of its Chinese language, style, and music; it was interesting for the first ten minutes for American spectators, Zhihuán told me, but after that people's attention spans dropped off. Its general lack of success had to do with the market and, as he said to me many times and in many ways during this interview, "the market decides." When I asked Zhihuán, for instance, what his knowledge was concerning the accuracy of the research that had been published in China on *zájì*, he pointed me to the Centre of Acrobatics Research as a better point of reference for that sort of thing: "We *do* more than *talk* (here)…. We have the knowledge of the market," and "sometimes the talk is away from the reality." I couldn't help but wonder if he was right.

The reality, for AACB, consisted of working with circuses, producers, and theatres that were mainly based in Europe and America. The relationship developed with each particular client was a unique one, depending upon that client's individual desires and needs. For instance, AACB had a twenty-plus year relationship with Cirque Celeste,

[75] There were companies at the city and provincial levels, even though those companies were still also supposed to report to the main Ministry of Culture office in Běijīng.

which was a very good, reciprocal relationship, meaning that both AACB recommended good acts they knew of from the large state-run troupes in China to Cirque Celeste, and then Cirque Celeste had its own ideas, which they would then ask AACB to fill. He cited the Méizhōu *wǔshù* boys' perch pole act that was destined for Cirque Celeste's new Asian production, as being such an act that AACB helped to orchestrate. Cirque Celeste had envisioned this act, and asked AACB to find the acrobats that could carry it out. Accordingly, they turned to both the Méizhōu troupe, as well as one in Shàopíng [76] to train it. After some time, Cirque Celeste's Artistic Director assigned to the production made a trip to China to watch both versions, and then made the call that it would be Méizhōu that would get the contract. Zhihuán described the perch pole act as a new evolution on a traditional Chinese act. All troupes in China aspired to conjure up these kinds of acrobatic breakthroughs - acts that took things to the next level, but that were always grounded in the so-called traditional.

If AACB had a long relationship with a circus like Cirque Celeste, then they used one stable master contract, the conditions of which must be acceptable for the troupe at question, of course. Cirque Celeste was a well-reputed company with "good conditions" that treated the artists well; so most troupes would have been satisfied to work with them. Different contracts were set up differently, though. Some had everything broken down (i.e. performance fee versus other expenditures), whereas some just had one flat fee, or weekly fees, outlined. When Cirque Celeste (or any other abroad company) hired AACB for a specific assignment, AACB would take a percentage of the contract between the circus and the troupe, which AACB would

[76] Interestingly, this was the troupe at which Abdul had trained for three years during his cultural exchange.

have organized and negotiated between them. Apart from negotiating the contract, AACB also provided translators for the groups while they were working abroad, and management in the form of a "company representative" who needed to "discipline the group while on tour." When I asked what this meant, precisely, he only replied that the employer needed quality performance – that was the most important thing – and said that sometimes the artists were not well disciplined, and didn't give the quality performances they were supposed to. In order to avoid this predicament, AACB tried to find well-disciplined groups with good reputations to begin with. Aside from performance quality, safety was another (albeit secondary) major concern. AACB did their best to educate the artists about this, and give them lots of points to adhere to. Sometimes they took out insurance for the group as well, although this wasn't necessarily standard procedure. Whether or not acrobatics teachers would accompany the group on a tour depended upon the act. If they did, it was written into the contract, and happened "only when it's necessary."

Zhihuán said that there had been a pretty stable level of influx and out-flux in the ten years he had been with AACB, with very few circuses from abroad coming to China to perform. The market was the sole reason for this, Zhihuán said; not many foreign troupes could perform and live in China because, due to both the costs involved in producing an international show and the level of local Chinese acrobatics skill they would be measured up against, they simply didn't have an audience. When I asked for a rough estimate of how many performances came to China from abroad (including all of the various types of performance AACB worked with), he claimed that it was probably less than one percent of their total business. He gave the example of the Circus of Russia: the first two times their spectacle had landed on Chinese soil, they

did okay, and it was even becoming popular. After that, it was difficult: "It's a difficult market," a seasoned Zhihuán emphasized, yet again.[77]

Despite the fact that there was a good market for Chinese acrobats to perform abroad, the long, international tours were often difficult for the troupes because of the varying conditions of the circuses themselves, on top of the fact that it was just plain hard to live in a circus for such a long time, and to be so far away from home. But short tours just didn't make much money. Touring was expensive, Zhihuán pointed out, and it was difficult to make profits when so much money and labour was invested in just the basic, yet fundamental (not to mention gruelling), act of putting up and taking down the tent over and over again. Permanent, fixed shows were easier for everyone, he said.

Near to the end of our conversation, I asked Zhihuán about whether or not AACB had ever worked with a solo act that went abroad. He looked puzzled. He had never heard of such a thing. He thought about it for a moment, and said that it would be okay, though. What about if AACB would ever work directly with an artist himself (rather than as member of a troupe), I asked. That was not possible, he replied: "The artists, they belong to the troupe. You cannot take the artists away from the troupe. It's not possible." Usually the artists had been with the troupe since they were very young, and, importantly, the troupe had even trained its artists. Maybe it was different in the United States, he offered. Yes, it was, I responded. In China "only if the artist doesn't have a contract (with a troupe), (are) they… free. Usually the artists belong to the troupe." But, he eventually conceded, yes, in the event that the artist didn't "belong"

[77] At the time of this interview, unusually, Cirque Celeste was planning on putting on a brief production in a large Chinese metropolis, and seeing what kind of potential market they may find there. It closed down fairly quickly.

to a troupe, that it would be okay to work with him or her. Of course it would depend on what he or she could do; if the artist could perform a very good solo act, then, and only then, would it be possible. I imagined, from the tone in his voice, that he was only talking in the hypothetical. This made me think of what Qiăo had told me about *zájì* performances one day: that in China, audiences preferred to watch a large group of acrobats working together, seeing everyone "*pèihé*" (coordinate) together (there were usually 4-6 people in an act at minimum), and a higher level of acrobatics achieved in the process. According to Qiăo, Chinese people believed that one-person acts were easy, but that acts with many people in them were difficult. She told me that, "another country's acrobatic level (wa)s not easily developed because they (do) not have a group (of acrobats working together)." She gave the hypothetical example of two German brothers who could easily work well together, but if they were asked to work with more (or other) people, they wouldn't be able to. In China the preference for many acrobats working together wasn't only about performative cooperation; in terms of an audience's aesthetics, a big stage was just too big for one or two people, Qiăo said.

Acrobats in China depended upon the troupes they were a part of. They couldn't work without them, and were tightly controlled by the higher ups in them, largely, for fear of the leaders losing their own jobs as a result of acrobats' potential disregard for the strict rules that were placed upon them. For instance, in China, the troupe's performers' passports (regardless of how many times their owners had travelled abroad for show purposes, how old they may have been, or their status amongst the group) were kept under strict lock and guard by the troupe leaders to make sure the

acrobats would never run away while out of the country.[78] It was also the practice for the students who had come to China on exchange as well. The rules and security (both literal and cultural) employed to keep China's acrobats in line during international tours, were quite affective, indeed.

Qiǎo

As an agent, Qiǎo was on a whole different level than Zhihuán. While he dealt with extremely large-scale international entertainment companies and *zájì tuán*, Qiǎo operated on a very small-scale, local, and underground level. The work she did as an agent was under the table, and her interest in it was very much economical. During the course of six months in China, I accompanied Qiǎo on several trips to Huáxīng for the purposes of scouting out fresh young acrobatic talent, including the Habesha Jugglers who eventually, as I describe below, performed for her in Luòyáng. I also spent many late nights tagging along (or "following her," as she liked to call it) when she taxied her[79] small underage troupes from venue to venue and back to the over-securitized, under-cleaned digs she provided them with for the moments when they weren't performing. She worked on her own, and outside of the gaze of the leader of the acrobatic troupe where she taught. On different occasions she told me two different stories about this; the first was that her leader had no idea she worked as an agent to make extra cash (and if he found out, she would surely be fired), and the second was that her leader actually knew what she did but silently turned the other

[78] There were instances when acrobats from China did run. For instance, a member of the Méizhōu troupe split when the group was in Las Vegas for a performance. Apparently he stayed there, and worked for about ten years as an acrobat, before eventually deciding to return home where he was faced with a stiff fine of 50,000 RMB from the troupe. Compared with African circus performers, however, the incident of Chinese performers running at the time of my research was very small. As one circus performer friend of mine suggested, these things come in waves.

[79] Not insignificantly, I think, Qiǎo was just one of a number of agents who often referred to the acrobats she hired as being "hers."

way, and if she ever got too obvious about her ventures, he would most definitely cut a large portion of her wages.

Before I go into the events that unfolded surrounding the Habesha Jugglers performing for her, I think it's necessary to give a brief context as to how Qiǎo's small scale informal 'contracts' for acrobatic performances were negotiated.[80] I emphasize the word 'contract' because, to my knowledge there was no official contract drawn up for these small-scale performances; everything was based on oral agreement, trust, and word of mouth (in terms of whom one could trust). For example, when Shān Lǎoshī referred to my arrangement with him as my teacher, he called it our 'contract', even though, in my opinion, we had only ever discussed a loose framework for things. This informal verbal type of contract was not applicable when it came to larger contract negotiations, however. Qiǎo usually found the troupes that she brought to Luòyáng at one of the hundred plus acrobatics schools that Huáxīng is littered with. When she travelled to audition the children[81] at the *zájì xuéxiào* with whom she had relations, she filmed the acrobatic programs and discussed tentative plans with the director of the school (i.e. performance dates, costs, number of acrobats and acts). Afterwards she would take the DV tape back to Luòyáng to show the various booking agents[82] she worked with the programs in order to get the green light. If everyone was happy with the arrangement, then the agent would pay Qiǎo for the performances, and Qiǎo would pay the director the fee they had settled on. One troupe she worked with while I was in China was contracted for 300 RMB per performance, of which Qiǎo kept 100 for herself, and gave the rest to the school's director. She told

[80] In terms of the limited understanding that my experiences, and interviews in the field, allotted me.
[81] The Habesha Jugglers were the oldest acrobats that Qiǎo worked with while I was in China. The Chinese acrobats that she hired while I was there were never older than 17.
[82] These were the people who are in charge of booking the acts for the venue.

me that only myself and one other person knew of the money she kept. She told me that it was up to the director what he did with the money, but that students generally didn't get paid for performance work, or "fieldwork" as it was called. She also told me that the students could not refuse if the director had given permission to an agent to hire them for performance purposes. Importantly, when Qiăo spoke to me in English about hiring acrobats, she used the term "rent"; but when she spoke in Mandarin to a school's director, she would say something like, *"Wŏ xiăng yāoqĭng sān ge xuéshēng…"* (I would like to *invite* three students…). She told me that she always provided accommodation for the acrobats in the same place, a bathhouse that she considered very "safe" because a person needed to show the guard a card whenever leaving or entering: Qiăo's acrobats only left for performances, or an occasional dinner that she treated them to. The number of nightly performances by her acrobats usually ranged from two to five. She usually kept one or two troupes performing nightly in Luòyáng, and she changed the troupes every 1-4 months. As it went, Qiăo was very much used to being in total charge of the acrobats she rented. For instance, on one occasion Qiăo called me and wanted to come over. After she arrived at my flat, she told me that the private troupe she had been hosting in Luòyáng was preparing to go to Spain in one month's time. They would spend six months there after their time with her was going to end, but because she was unsure that she would be able to secure a second troupe to take their place by the time they were going to leave, it was a possibility that she couldn't "let" the other troupe go when they were supposed to.

Along with opening up about her personal pursuits as an agent, Qiăo relayed a host of other detailed information to me regarding private and public acrobatics troupes

performing in China and abroad. The two most important points she discussed with me regarding performances both had to do with money. First and foremost, there was "high level, high money," meaning that if the act contained extremely difficult and/or dangerous and innovative tricks that were executed "more perfectly" as Qiăo would have put it; they were paid more to perform.[83] The second important issue was that whatever money the acrobats wound up making, it was a much smaller percentage compared with what the company that was hiring the troupe had paid. Generally, in a large internationally reputable circus, each Chinese performer would wind up receiving, at most, about half of what was paid for them. The rest would be distributed between the agency that negotiated the contract, which was virtually *always* AACB in international deals with large and important shows, and the troupe or school the group belonged to. It is also highly likely that some of the money may well have been allocated to various other individuals within the chain of middlemen and women who were involved in the deal making process.

More than just speaking with her about her work, in the field I was also able to see Qiăo in action. For example, the first time I went with her to a larger private acrobatics school[84] to search for new acts for her to market, I was lucky enough to be able to sit in on the negotiations. After an edible prologue of steaming hot *jiăozi* (dumplings), followed by a hearty visual main course – watching and video taping the young students eagerly perform the acts that Qiăo was looking to book - Qiăo and I retired to the upstairs 'office' (which doubled as a bedroom) where we spent a few long hours with the school's director. Both of them had their notepads drawn out and

[83] Qiăo told me about one act that was paid 50,000 USD each time they performed their act. The same figure was quoted about that act to me several years prior in the U.S. It was the highest figure I had heard of for a circus performer.
[84] There were approximately 70-80 students at the school.

their pens scribbling feverishly as they went back and forth in rapid verbal banter about the conditions of the arrangement they were about to make. Qiăo wanted the program 'kicking bowls'. She wanted to hire ten people that could do, altogether, 8-10 different programs that she could switch around depending on the venue and the night. As the discussion went on for what seemed like forever, I couldn't help but think back to a moment a few hours prior when, after having given the director a more general introduction as to what she was looking for and, in turn, what he might be able to provide, Qiăo turned to me and said that this was "like cooking"; they were making a recipe, and first they needed to gather all the right ingredients. Later on in the day, when I would inquire as to how she thought the final contract sat with her, she told me, "I think it is a good meal."

On that first of many short-term trips I took to Huáxīng, I accompanied Shān Lăoshī and Qiăo, who wanted to audition the African students at their school. The Kenyans went along with it easily, but Qiăo wound up inadvertently forcing a reluctant audition out of the Habesha Jugglers: Ras, in heated discussion with Dōng Lăoshī, initially attempted to opt the group out of showing their acts. Later, after I got to know them, Ras would explain to me that it was because one of the girls, Maharene, had a hand injury, so he felt she shouldn't have to perform.[85] In response to his protest, Dōng Lăoshī made it fairly clear that the audition wasn't optional, and that the four boys could pull it off without the two girls; so they had no choice but to go ahead and perform for Qiăo.

[85] Ras' protective behavior regarding Maharene's injury would differ dramatically from his continual later insistence in Europe's Circus of Africa when she had a chronic shoulder injury from falling in their doubles tissu act. The resulting rift that developed in part led to Maharene leaving the group upon their return home. I describe this later in the thesis.

After the audition, and prior to ironing out the details of the 'contract' in a face-to-face negotiation (which I was not permitted to sit in on), Qiǎo was initially concerned because she didn't know if the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics would "let (her) rent foreign students." She had only ever dealt with Chinese acrobats before, and venturing into foreign territory (even if it was on her own country's turf), was a bit intimidating to her. If the school did give her the go ahead and let her "rent" the African acrobats, as she had not so insignificantly put it, she was interested in having the four male Habesha Jugglers perform in Luòyáng for a period of ten days, followed by another ten days when the two female Habesha Jugglers and the two youngest of the Kenyans would perform, and then a final ten day period when the four oldest Kenyans would take to the stage. In the end, Qiǎo was forced to compromise, however, because the Habesha Jugglers refused to be split up. Ras told Dōng Lǎoshī that they all must go together, or not at all. And rather than having the school lose out on the profits they could earn from the students' performances, the leader did what he could to appease the Habesha Jugglers' needs while simultaneously giving Qiǎo an acceptable package, all of which amounted to her successfully arranging a contract with the leader of the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics that secured the Habesha Jugglers for a tentative fifteen day performance, followed by fifteen days of performances by the Kenyans scheduled in the city I was first based in, Luòyáng.

The "meal" that Qiǎo made of the Habesha Jugglers, however, would turn out to be a bit hard for her to digest. Part of the agreement that was reached with the leader of the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics was that Dōng Lǎoshī would accompany the Ethiopian students on their "fieldwork" in Luòyáng. This was not common procedure, but it was definitely not unheard of either. Particularly because they were foreigners, Dōng

Lǎoshī's supervisory presence became a basic necessity in that he would provide a buffer to absorb any potential problems that could eventually reflect poorly upon the school. He would ensure that all would go smoothly. In theory, that is.

I took a taxi to Sauna Clubhouse to meet Qiǎo and the Habesha Jugglers, who were in the midst of rehearsing on stage when I arrived. Qiǎo swiftly guided me to the VIP (I'd like to think so, anyway) upstairs balcony, and told me that she needed my help. She said that she needed me to tell "(my) black people" that their program needed to be "more perfect". I didn't have a moment to ask her why she didn't tell them on her own (her English was quite good) before she got down to what was really on her mind: immediately after they arrived Dōng Lǎoshī had apparently asked her for more money. He told her that because the Habesha Jugglers were foreigners, they simply needed more. Qiǎo was very distraught over this. She wasn't sure whether the Habesha Jugglers knew about Dōng Lǎoshī's insistent request, and it was her gut instinct that he was asking for more money for the benefit of his own pocket, rather than a legitimate higher going rate for foreigners or just plain old cultural difference in terms of monetary recompense for hats tossed and cartwheels spun. She explained that if she refused to anti up in this game of Dōng's, she would need me to ask the Ethiopian troupe to "help" her by going ahead and performing anyway. Barely able to overcome my own feelings of being caught in the middle, I said that if this truly were the case, I would consider asking them as long as everything was fair (i.e., as long as they were actually getting paid, and everyone was being honest). Qiǎo seemed content enough with this answer, but little did she know that the problems had only begun.

The next day I arrived at the hotel Qiǎo had set up for the troupe. Interestingly, Qiǎo had put the Habesha Jugglers up in a different location than the one that she always

used to house her troupes. True to what I had been told numerous times that day, the boys' hotel room was not in a good condition; the ceiling was dripping water frantically into a green plastic bowl placed in the centre of the floor, and the floor was generally wet and covered with long clumps of black hair and dirt. They were not shy in telling me that, comparatively, the other places they'd stayed when they'd performed in China had been very nice. Nor were they shy when it came to letting Dōng Lǎoshī know that the accommodation was not up to par. This expression of dissatisfaction carried over later into the night; after their performance none of the Habesha Jugglers seemed in a good mood, and Qiǎo appeared quite frustrated and out of sorts herself. She kept saying that she felt dizzy and she emphatically told me that there were "more failures" in the juggling act that evening, meaning mistakes made during the act (e.g., someone dropping a club in the juggling act). Everything seemed to be coming to a head.

A few days later, I received a series of frantic phone calls from Qiǎo, who was calling from outside the venue where the Habesha Jugglers were performing. First she asked me to tell the "black people" that she wanted to give them extra money, but she didn't want Dōng Lǎoshī to know about it. She passed off the phone to a rather irate Ras, and I passed on the information to him. He didn't have much of a reaction, and I asked him how things were going there. He said they were good, but quickly started talking about the tissu act he didn't want to do. He kept saying that he "(didn't) need to do that" anymore, and muttered something to the extent of it not being the school's act. I asked him if he wanted me to tell Qiǎo about his objection to performing the act, but he told me no, that he was ready to talk to her himself. Then he pretty much hung up on me. A few minutes later, Qiǎo called me back to say that she wanted my help

again; she wanted me to tell Ras that if he didn't do the tissu act, she wouldn't give them extra money which was essentially a tip for performing well. She told me that other troupes had always been "easy" to work with, and that she was considering cancelling their performances because the "black people" were "giving (her) more trouble." She wanted them to "help" her, and believed that for them to do so would be mutually beneficial; that by doing the acts she wanted them to, including the tissu act, in the way she wanted them to - "more perfect" and without too many "failures" - they could earn some money, and Qiăo could earn some money. Qiăo explained that the whole situation made her feel "dizzy" because, in this case, even "the Chinese people" (meaning Dōng Lăoshī) were "giving (her) trouble."

Because of the mounting problems between themselves and Qiăo and Dōng Lăoshī, the Habesha Jugglers returned to the school in Huáxīng before ever finishing out their 'contract' with Qiăo. She told me that they left early, and that the Kenyans would not be coming at all, because Dōng Lăoshī gave her "more trouble"; apparently, she said, he was passing his phone number on to people at the performance venues in order to do some business renting out acrobats on his own, without Qiăo, and for cheap. Upon hearing of the situation, Qiăo's classmate[86] wanted her to have somebody fight Dōng Lăoshī.[87] Later when I talked to them, I heard quite a different story from the Habesha Jugglers; Melaku said that they didn't like Qiăo at all, and had called their school and

[86] Qiăo had a particular ex-classmate of hers who served as her primary confidant and advisor when it came to navigating difficult personal matters and making decisions.

[87] Qiăo was referring to one of many quasi-bandits hired to help other people retrieve money owed to them, who operated within illegal networks, or gangs of four or five members, who claim half of the money they retrieve as their salary. Qiăo had implied to me that she was using their services to deal with a leader/boss of a certain venue who had long owed her money, and consistently ducked her efforts to collect what was due. The person who hires them never meets them face to face (the member who Qiăo was doing business with thought he was actually working for her friend); rather, they get in touch with them through various networks of friends. When I asked Qiăo if I could meet one, she emphatically told me no because they were remarkably dangerous, and never talked about what they did after the fact, anyway.

asked the leader if they could come back early. The leader had obviously said yes. Dōng Lǎoshī, however, told me that the school didn't receive any money for any of the times that the Africans performed in China, including this one. Their "fieldwork" was free, he said. I knew that Qiǎo had negotiated prices for the Ethiopians' acts with the leader of the school, and that, according to Qiǎo, Dōng Lǎoshī had asked for more from her in Luòyáng. When I pressed him a bit about this little discrepancy, Dōng Lǎoshī said that he didn't "know these things," and that the only thing he knew was that the way the Africans performed was the same way that the Chinese students performed.

Qiǎo had once told me that in China, if a student at a *zájì xuéxiào* is rented out or invited to perform, then he or she is obligated, and refusal is not an option. She believed this unspoken rule to be applicable for foreign students as well. To a certain extent she was right; Ras had pressed Dōng Lǎoshī to relieve the troupe from auditioning for Qiǎo in the first place, but his plea was ignored, and the group had to (begrudgingly) go along with her request. But they were able to put a foot (or six) down, however, when it came to negotiations over the time and number of people from their troupe that went to Luòyáng to perform. And when things were clearly not going their way in relationship to Qiǎo, the group did the unthinkable (to Qiǎo, anyway), and successfully convinced the school's leader to let them come back early. She learned the tough way that the hard and fast rules of performing acrobatics in China (even if some of them were implicit) were necessarily flexible when it came to incorporating foreign students into the mix.

Freedom was an essential motivating factor for the Habesha Jugglers' negotiations with Qiăo and their school's leader in relation to performing in (and leaving) Luòyáng. However, despite appearances, Qiăo's situation had some things in common with the troupe. Qiăo's role as an agent gave her access to greater income as well as providing a form of independence from the state-run *zájì tuán* that she was tied to. Her under-the-table endeavours representing young students of acrobatics (as hush-hush as they had to be), were nonetheless a means of gaining access to various types of freedom that were not easy to come by in China. One could even say the same for Dōng Lăoshī – that his attempts to ply extra money from Qiăo, and to steal her clients by offering a lower price for Huáxīng's acrobats, were a way to increase his own career-oriented freedom, and henceforth his life options (not to mention his bank account). The relationships he had already established with the foreign students at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics required that he act flexibly, and "change his mind" so he could "listen to their culture," a situation that Dōng Lăoshī had attempted to play to his advantage when bargaining with a culturally inexperienced Qiăo in Luòyáng. Because Dōng Lăoshī was, out of necessity, left with a kind of malleability in terms of developing his relationships with the Habesha Jugglers and other students in China on cultural exchange, in order to teach them he attempted to manoeuvre in certain ways that might not have been appropriate (or even possible) if he had, say, accompanied a Chinese troupe to work with Qiăo in Luòyáng.

Both Qiăo and Dōng Lăoshī used their skills to turn a profit in the situation. The Habesha Jugglers, however, even in the face of getting fined for not performing, refused to work for Qiăo, and instead returned to Huáxīng after a very short time in Luòyáng. Even though the group was looking to improve their and their families'

lives through the exchange, opting to refuse paid performance work revealed that more was at stake for the Habesha Jugglers in the context of acting as Qiǎo's artists in China. Succumbing to claims of needing them to "help" her by offering their "rare" "foreign" bodily skills at a cheaper price so that she could retain the extra money that Dōng Lǎoshī was trying to access, was tantamount to temporarily surrendering ownership of their own bodies within a framework where the viscerally-located structural violence of racism already expressed a significant imbalance of power. Maintaining control over one's body in this situation became a way to resist appropriation of it by Chinese audiences who only wanted to "watch black people" because they *were* black, and subverted submission to Qiǎo's pleas to stop the "black people" from giving her even "more trouble."

Nelson

Nelson was the founder, director, co-producer, promoter, and M.C. of Circus of Africa, and also quite proudly an agent for roughly 100 African circus performers[88] who were working in Europe at the time of my China fieldwork. China's acrobatic exchanges, and the simultaneously vulnerable and liberated positions the foreign students found themselves in as their participants, were also key tools that Nelson used to gain access to 1. Circus performers who needed him in order to avoid returning home to face various literal and economic restraints, and 2. Inexpensive and hard-to-find equipment for his Tanzanian school and European show. One of the first face-to-face conversations I had had with him was extremely revealing as to his approach to business. It was mid-morning, and the two of us were downstairs on the Circus of Africa crew bus. The bus was well-equipped, indeed, it lived up to name of

[88] According to Nelson, who was prone to exaggerating.

the “Mercedes of night liners (tour buses)” that one of the drivers had deemed it, with deep brown leather furniture, an upstairs lounge that held a stocked mini-bar, and an impressive entertainment centre in the back. I had arrived at the bus in the middle of the night on the previous night, and had only managed to catch a few hours of broken sleep in the upstairs top-berth of my new bed before I woke from sheer excitement at finding myself in these rock-star digs, and saw that Nelson was downstairs, and ready to talk.

We spoke for several hours, in quick and inspired conversation that had Nelson talking so fast, and touching on so many subjects, that I found it quite challenging to keep track of everything he said. There was a moment, however, later on in the conversation, that seemed to swell out of a kind of crescendo; it was a moment that, looking back on it now, I think revealed more about Nelson to me than anything else. I asked him why he “did it all”; that is, had self-funded the acrobatics school in Dar Es Salaam, was an agent for around 100 African acrobats, and was even attempting to expand Circus of Africa to include another circus in Tanzania. Nelson seemed stumped by my question, as if he had been so caught up in the ‘what’ that he had never paused to consider the ‘why’, and said he didn’t know. Then, after a moment’s contemplation, he retracted his first response and said, instead, that he guessed he wanted to make as many of himself as possible. And that meant that he needed to “get hold of them (the African circus artists),” and to make sure that all the circus performers who were working from Africa went through one “channel” - his.

Nelson had an important artist in Jina who had been part of the first China-Africa exchange at the school in Huáxīng, and she had connected him with the other African

students there. For a man like Nelson those exchanges provided an ideal point of recruitment for his work as a circus agent and proprietor. China was also unchartered territory for other agents looking to scout African circus performers. Nelson alluded to this fact when he was interested in picking up the Sudanese troupe, and told me that if they were still on exchange in China, it would be no problem because "no one (else) will take them" from there; but if they were already in Sudan, he had to be quick because another agent might "take them." On top of that, the students involved in the exchanges oftentimes knew one other, and because they had a strong desire to help out their fellow Ethiopians (or, sometimes, artists from the other African countries involved in the exchanges), they were eager to introduce Nelson to the other foreigners training acrobatics in China, or even back at home. After Nelson 'took' his artists, he actively encouraged their assistance in recruiting other circus performers into his corner. Sometimes he even offered monetary recompense for the extra work that would entail.[89] Simultaneously, because the artists he was keen on gathering up were in a foreign country, the process of getting their European visas was, Ras suggested, once removed than if they had been in their own countries. Accordingly, this allowed any potential minor local difficulties (e.g., getting around the Ethiopian Circus Board) to be more easily evaded by Nelson. On top of that, he was dealing with many performers who preferred not to return to their own countries if at all possible and so he retained the upper hand, because those artists wanted to go straight to working in a circus abroad, and they were open to do what was asked of them in order to do so. Arguably, the situation of African circus performers on exchange in China suited the business-oriented agenda of Nelson, an agent whose ultimate goal

[89] For example, after the end of the tour, Nelson, Nassir (one of the Ethiopian bounce jugglers in Circus of Africa) and I were talking in the hotel in Frankfurt, and he suggested that Nassir help wrangle budding new talent for him from Nassir's own region in Ethiopia, Tigray. His services would surely be paid for well, Nelson said.

was to "get hold of them (every African acrobat)" and to make sure that they all went through his "channel."

In order to guarantee a successful monopoly over Africa's circus performers, Nelson did his best to ensure that the ones who were working for him were well taken care of. Because, as Nelson said, African circus performers were more "rare" than circus artists of other nationalities, the ones with lower skill levels could still find plenty of work, and get paid more than, say, Chinese acrobats with higher skill levels than theirs. For instance, Nelson told me that the Chinese were currently the cheapest in terms of price for acrobats. I was also told by Qiăo that African acrobats were much cheaper than Chinese. Neither one of these blanket statements was completely accurate. More importantly, however, was the fact that agents' discourses on ethnicity were one of the defining factors that determined a circus performer's monetary worth.

Tanzania

Cultivating "rare" African circus performers whom he could take care of had led Nelson to establish his own acrobatics school in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. At the time that I met him, he had about ten girls training there. There were only Tanzanians training there, he said, during that period of time.[90] The evolution of opening this school was tightly intertwined with his own background in the circus. When he was young, he told me, he wanted to be a circus performer, but his family had sort of discouraged it. They said that he couldn't make a living that way. They asked him what he would ever be able to do after he couldn't perform acrobatics anymore. He

[90] There was just one other school for acrobats in Tanzania (for younger acrobats), but that director didn't like Nelson because the students would all eventually leave his school and come to Nelson's. He sent the contortion boys from Circus of Africa there at first.

went against his family's doubts, and did it. He proved to them that it was possible to succeed, and now he encouraged his own students to follow their dreams. When they also succeeded, and were able to work as performers so quickly, their families could see that it was not only possible, but also it was an economic opportunity for them. Then other family members would join in, providing Nelson with more students and more potential circus performers to feed off of as an agent. Some of Nelson's students (who came from farther away) lived at a house he provided for them near his school. Along with accommodation, he gave them two meals per day. But here was the catch: the more he gave them, the harder they were expected to work. He would take anyone to train at first, but then, over time, weeded out the ones without the skills, the ones who didn't want to train, and the ones, as he said, who were just plain lazy. But, like many of the Chinese, he made it a point to say that he didn't encourage kids that were too clever to do circus.[91] Nelson's school was certainly a good resource for his own work as an agent and circus promoter, but the crop of circus performers he was farming still wasn't enough to nourish the hungry appetite of the international circus market, which he depended upon for his livelihood. He had to look to other sources to fill the gaps he would be able to profit off of, especially because he planned on opening his own circus in Tanzania, and this dream would require access to a larger pool of home grown talent from which to pull to accommodate his expanding 'African' circus empire.

Nelson loosely compared his vision of what he wanted to do with the African circus, with that of Urban Vibe Circus in the United States. Urban Vibe Circus was an extremely high energy, hip-hop urban style circus that catered to the African

[91] He mentioned one boy he had who was very clever, but who just loved to do circus for its own sake, and said that this boy was an exception.

American market in the U.S. In the early 1990's, its founder, Barry Davis, who was considered by many to be a pioneer and visionary in the entertainment field, saw a gap in the market and wanted to bring family entertainment to the African American community in a way that it had not been done before. Initially when he created Urban Vibe Circus in the early ninties, the production only showcased African American and African circus talent, and presented more of a traditional circus aesthetic. Over time, it evolved to embrace a fresh urban flavour that celebrated gospel, soul, and hip hop music and dance, with costumes inspired by the African American style of the communities it catered too. Urban Vibe Circus was an anomaly in the circus world; rather than relying on displaying bodily forms 'otherness' and 'difference' that circuses in general, and American circuses in particular, had done for hundreds of years, Urban Vibe Circus instead reflected their audiences' greatness right back at them as it displayed the extraordinarily powerful African American and African bodies, highly trained in corporeal wonders, that took to the ring every night. Gradually the show began to include acts from other countries, and it became fairly multicultural, although African and African American performers still dominated its line-up. In aiming to tackle a broader market (at least theoretically), the production tried to operate under the assumption that the desire for urban flavour was, indeed, a global phenomenon. Nonetheless, the production still played on sites[92] that were often on the edges of high crime destitute neighbourhoods, and kept its ticket prices phenomenally low.

To make up for it, Urban Vibe Circus performed a whole lot of shows per week, and Nelson said that that was what allowed them to continue to cater to the African

[92] Sites were the physical locations on which the circus tent and its operations were erected.

American market. He thought that if Urban Vibe Circus were to try to perform fewer than eight or so shows in a week, they would go under pretty quickly. Luckily for them, though, they had found a niche with African American audiences that they could keep performing to forever. However, Nelson said, wealthier Americans were often afraid to go to the neighbourhoods that Urban Vibe Circus hit, causing the group to have to perform more times per week on a cheaper ticket. Nelson planned on doing the same thing with his circus in Africa (perform more shows per week for a "lower class" audience), and that his African circus would perform thirteen shows per week at the most. When he was young, Nelson remembered, he did sixteen shows every week: "It was normal… it was normal, but I didn't like it." Rather than expecting his artists to have to endure the performative burden that Nelson had to shoulder in his youth, he wanted to be "fair" to them. His idea was more flexible than Urban Vibe Circus', he said, because he could "go to both places" (the United States/Europe and Africa) with it. But at its heart, the Tanzanian show would essentially be, he said, a circus *by* Africans and *for* Africans to see. He said that if Africans could see that the circus was good, they could see it as a possible way to make a future. Particularly, he wanted to pay them a "good enough wage for Africa." To Nelson, this meant a wage that was better than the average African office worker's wage. He wanted to make sure that people – and most importantly, his artists - knew that performing in his circus was "not a low class job." Sure enough, they did.

After spending some time on the Circus of Africa tour with them, Nelson and Tsetseg decided that they wanted me to come and work for them in Tanzania.[93] He couldn't

[93] Nelson and Tsetseg weren't exactly sure what my job would be there. They thought it might be a sort of PR position, where I would fund raise at a high level, and oversee a lot of the publicity aspects of the circus. What they knew for sure was that they needed someone who could speak and write good English.

offer me much in terms of a salary, Nelson said, because the circus was a new undertaking for him – not to mention a big risk – and because it was going to be taking off in Tanzania, the potential for profit would be much less than if it had been taking place in Europe. But Nelson had high hopes for his baby: this would be the first year of what Nelson envisioned to be an annual undertaking (he was aiming for a six month tour that would start in Dar es Salaam, and move on through Tanzania, and maybe Uganda, Rwanda, and Kenya [but maybe not Kenya because of political unrest]). This year would see the first 'African' circus owned by an African in Africa, and then, next year, a Russian circus in Africa, the year after that, a Chinese circus in Africa, and so on and so forth. The small salary would eventually be worth it. He would pay me sixty-seventy USD per day, and provide me with very cushy accommodation there. Even though I was extremely excited about the idea of working for the show in Tanzania, I couldn't help but notice that the scanty salary (as Nelson had described it) was still significantly more than the amount that the artists who were going to be performing in the show would be earning. The tour manager, Dietrich, might be going too, Nelson said, but he was asking for three times the money Nelson had been paying him for performing his job as Circus of Africa's tour manager in Europe. Nelson told me that he needed Dietrich, but he also needed him at a "reasonable price."

Money and Opportunity

Nelson knew the importance of monetary figures in creating opportunities for himself, his circus, and those artists he represented. One night, early on in the tour, I was downstairs on the Circus of Africa crew bus, sorting through photographs I had taken that evening during the show. Nelson and Tsetseg came in, and Nelson asked to see

my photos. All of them. I told him that I had taken so many, that there was bound to be a lot of crappy ones. I would pick out the good ones to show him, I said. He said it didn't matter, and that he wanted to see all of them. So I started flipping through them. When he saw a good one, he made an "mmmmmm" sound: a seal of approval from the big man. He seemed to like the same ones that I did, and despite the fact that it was extremely late, there were tons of photos to look at, his girlfriend had already gone to bed, and he was eating, Nelson didn't appear to lose attention for a second. Ideas must have swirled in his head all the time, I thought; he was a sober man who was truly possessed by his passionate one-pointed circus-oriented vision. Out of the blue, he asked me if I could write. He asked me to look at two statements he was trying to write: two proposals for Circus of Africa. He asked how I would write them, and I said that it depended upon who was going to be reading them. He said he had never thought of that before. I asked him if he wanted me to write them for him, and he said yes. He showed me the statements. In one, a funding proposal for the show he was creating in Tanzania, he had written that he had already invested 500,000 Euro in the circus. He told me not to believe that part, it was really around 300,000 Euro, he said. When we looked at the second statement, a letter to the president of Tanzania proposing to bring Circus of Africa to a massive trade conference celebrating Tanzanian culture in Dar es Salaam,[94] he instructed me to, when I wrote it, say that sixty – no, wait, seventy – percent of the performers in the circus were from Tanzania despite the fact that this was nowhere near the truth.

Although the 'truth' of money and opportunity may have been vague and misty in reality, when it benefitted Nelson, he shamelessly promenaded them as hard facts to

[94] The 'Salaam's Assembly' was a large-scale trade conference that was to be attended by a big crowd of African American celebrities from the film and music industries. One of the promoters Nelson was hoping to get on board for his Tanzanian circus was involved in putting the conference together.

entice the people whose help he needed to turn his circus visions into reality. However, he was a little more grounded when the topic turned to making concrete money for himself: Nelson was constantly calculating, though not always well, about how much money should be spent on marketing to garner a good return. He explained that the promoter for 'Oh, Africa!' in London had spent about two million Euros on publicity that year (and said that the promoter had given away about five thousand free tickets in advance of the London premier; far more than the usual two to three hundred). When I told him that I saw a massive amount of posters for the show in London, he quickly asked me whether they were using posters of the circus performers' bodies, rather than just the one of the face. He said that he heard they were, and when Tsetseg came downstairs, he asked her if she thought they should do the same thing with their posters. Another time, when I asked Nelson if it was better to tour with buses, or how they did it before with tents, he said that it was more economical to tour this way. Sometimes, with a tent, they had to perform two times per day to make up the money. There were richer people who would come to theatres, so Nelson could charge more for the tickets. With this method, the other (local) promoters bought the shows for a fixed price, and then were responsible for marketing them well and selling the tickets. The local promoters would be the ones losing out if the show didn't sell. Not Circus of Africa. And definitely not Nelson.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented case studies of three different circus agents who worked with my performing interlocutors in the field, and explored how their role as mediators was fundamental to the mobility of the circus performers they represented. Zhihuán knew that the international market was good for *zájì*, but that China had a

"difficult market" for foreign circuses. He also understood the cultural ins-and-outs of the operational procedures of local Chinese troupes, as well as their potential problems in the global market; he knew, for instance, that a company representative travelling internationally with a group was usually a necessity in order to ensure that performers stayed in line with what was required. An agent like Qiăo, who had accumulated her prior knowledge solely by working in a small-scale local acrobatic market in China, compared "renting" acrobats to "cooking," where the overall objective was simply to make a "good meal." Lacking a shared history and culture with the Habesha Jugglers proved to be too problematic for her, and by keeping the focus on the bottom line, she missed the larger picture of what concerned the Habesha Jugglers most – freedom - and she lost out in the end because of it. Qiăo was also too busy struggling with the day-to-day issues of getting by through orchestrating small scale local performances to be able to turn her attention to the larger picture of either market desires or the artists' cross-cultural needs. Even when Dōng Lăoshī pronounced that foreigners needed to be paid more money, she was unsure as to the validity of his claim. Nelson, on the other hand, understood the "rare(ity)" of African circus performers, and was confident that what they lacked in high-level skill could be made up for in raw energy in a European market that was inflicted with a serious case of "African Fever." In any case, he was sure they could get paid more than Chinese acrobats who, despite having a higher skill level, were oversaturating the market. Nelson's background as a man from Zimbabwe imbued him with the 'cultural authority' to craft 'African' acts and shows, and he felt that it was his duty to "channel" as many circus artists from Africa as he could. He thought that paying them a "good enough wage for Africa" was a "fair" way to show them that they could follow their dreams all the way to success (not to mention economic opportunity)

because ‘African’ circus was not a “low class” job. At the same time, by creating “as many of (himself) as possible” through all of his operations (the school, the show, the agency), Nelson was growing his own personal pool of talent for a dream show that would tour in Africa, directed by an African, composed of African circus artists, and for the eyes of African audiences. He hoped that his version of ‘Africa’ would be flexible enough that he could take it everywhere.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Show

Introduction: Cultural Reconfiguration

Having crossed the 'bridge' of chapter four's mediating agents, chapter five is the first of the three remaining thesis chapters which will be set in Europe on the tour of Circus of Africa as it travelled nightly on sleeper buses through Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy. This chapter is informed by the broader global political economy of circus and deals with ways that the Habesha Jugglers and other African performers in the show negotiated processes in which they were required by Nelson to be culturally flexible for the sake of the onstage production. I focus on how the growing market desire in Europe for 'African' circus - aptly described to me by Nelson as an "African Fever" – influenced micropolitical processes of 'Africanizing' the people, props, sounds, and objects in Circus of Africa onstage. Aside from the first part of the chapter, which presents an ethnographic description of the show in its totality, the chapter includes: 1. Elaborations on Nelson's multi-facetted role as an expert of subjectivity (Rose 1998: 151) and an important catalyst for changing circus performers' acts into something more 'African'. Nikolas Rose calls "experts of subjectivity" professionals "who transfigure existential questions about the purpose of life and the meaning of suffering into technical questions of the most effective ways of managing malfunction and improving 'quality of life'" (Rose 1998: 151). As the predominant middleman that the Habesha Jugglers worked with, Nelson was

emblematic of this, 2. Ethnographic implications that spectators and performers alike believed that 'African' circus had a particular energy that differentiated it from other (more predictable) forms of circus, and 3. In keeping in line with circus tradition, an exploration of how the nationalities of Circus of Africa's performers, music, and products were explicitly disguised in order to increase the cultural diversity, and palatability, of the show. Keep in mind the definition of 'culture' "as *a marker of difference* and not as a generic, as in, our common contemporary culture" (Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion & Rees 2008: 108, emphasis mine), as it figures usefully in relation to how Circus of Africa's employees engaged (or didn't) in 'cultural movements' that reconfigured their circus acts in ways that intended to enhance the marketability of the show for German audiences.

In the previous chapter I identified Nelson as the predominant agent and middleman that the Habesha Jugglers worked with during my research. Part of his expertise was due to the fact that Nelson was more than just an agent; he was also the Founder, Artistic Director, and Co-Producer, Promoter and M.C. of Circus of Africa. That meant that his responsibilities included more than just knowing when and how to move circus performers around the globe as an agent must; Nelson also had to have both the 'cultural knowledge' and the market knowledge regarding what would be appetising to the target audience – in this case a predominantly German and European group – and the wherewithal to make the show happen. In the on-going process of producing Circus of Africa, crafting an 'African' show was the name of the game, and this involved playing with 'cultures' in ways that demonstrated flexibility in respect to their depictions. The African performers Nelson employed were implicitly required to participate in this process.

The vast majority of African circus performers who branched out internationally, including the Habesha Jugglers, moved through 'African' themed circuses at least in the beginning stages of their career trajectories. Considering that Nelson was one of a very select few who helped control, regulate, and channel the flows of African circus performers around the globe, the importance of the relationships these artists cultivated with Nelson cannot be overstated. Their dependence upon him was vital, and the power relations in the equation were profound.

'Africa'

I am sitting in the nosebleed section of a gigantic Stadthalle in Lübeck, Germany. The audience flutters in, rapidly filling up the empty space, people buzzing around creating a kind of invisible fire in the air around us. On the stage, a seven-piece band serves as the backdrop to a set of drums that have been browned and blackened with images of 'African' masks. 'African' music pounds out of the speakers. I look down and see the swarms of grey and balding shiny heads milling about. 'Who in the world can this audience be made up of?' I start to ask myself, but I have no time to ponder the question because the music quickly dies down. There is complete silence. And then, in the darkness, applause. An M.C. enters the freshly lit stage dressed with 'African' garb complete with designs of giraffes and buxom, shapely women. He addresses the audience, riling them up in a kingly hat, and announcing the show with enthusiastic verbal injections that are an even mix of English and German. The audience goes crazy with laughter, shouts, and screams. He orders them to throw their kids up in the air, for the women to take off their tops, and the men to take off their pants; in other words, to get buck wild because, as he proclaims: "This is not a

normal show, this is eine Afrikanische show!!!" They meet his energy and up the ante, as it were. "Are you ready for our mama, Africa?!!!" He asks them. He is using mostly English now. And then the drumming starts.

Abebe's jar juggling act (a traditional Chinese acrobatics act) comes first. He is dressed in a fur loincloth kind of like a Scandinavian cave man, but much more beautiful than that. He shakes his pelvis not-so-subtly as he hypnotises the audience by tossing, catching, and precariously balancing a heavy metal jar on the top of his head. I remember the protruding feeling of the balding lump he had developed on his noggin from the jar spending so much of its practice time perched up there in China, and I am immediately taken back to Huáxīng; to the first time Abebe showed me his act, as I photographed him in the 'Foreign Students Hall' of the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics. He made many mistakes back then, and dropped the jar, self-consciously, a lot during those long five minutes. But here in Germany, he's gained a confidence that I didn't remember him having in China, and I have no fear watching him; I only trust in his ability to master every catch. Also, rather than the 'Chinese-style' stencils that once covered it, his jar is painted with those rough and earth-toned 'wild' animals that the landscape of 'Africa' - so far, far away – is widely famous for.

The show is full of an energy that never seems to completely let up; strobe lights, pounding music, undeniably elaborate headdresses, and cowry shells adorn everything in sight. As the performance gets going though, it starts to become clear to me that - as vibrant as Circus of Africa is - there's no storyline to this show; it's simply a wash of 'Africa'. A contortionist twists and turns himself into a pretzel, while a small but dexterous boy-man conquers a unicycle with ease. A long and lithe

magician, Jina, changes her face to the frenzy of a musical 'voodoo' incantation, and dancers whirl to the beat of a violently potent djembe drum.

The excitement I feel at the start of the show is only exacerbated when I see the Habesha Jugglers perform their club juggling act; almost everything about this performance lies in complete contrast to what I saw coming out of them in China. Here in Lübeck, to the tune of Papa Afrika's rendition of Gloria Estefan and Miami Sound Machine's 'Conga', their four beaming smiles dance alongside the seven flying clubs that are exchanged, swiftly, hand to hand. I picture this moment (and the audience as well) – so full of a bottomless and energetic pride - juxtaposed with the almost melancholic and lonely scenes they were performing in front of, in the smoky Chinese bathhouses and casinos of Luòyáng. Now the smiles of the Habesha Jugglers are invincible, unstoppable. But only nine months ago, in China, those same smiles seemed no match for the distracted 'audiences' of the bathhouse stages; the scanty white-robed and flip-flopped crowds that were too busy enjoying the benefits of a 2am foot rub by a disinterested and underpaid young woman, or just unwinding with a cigarette after a discreet turn with one of the resident prostitutes. In China's bathhouses and late-night casinos, no sooner did the Habesha Jugglers exit the stage, than the desperate smiles they hung onto so dearly during the performance, plummeted from their faces. They took relief in talking to me about a variety of things back then: the challenges of China's acrobatics world, the uncomfortable reactions they often got from Méizhōu's audiences (and its public in general), and about the promise that their future contract with Europe's Circus of Africa would - sooner rather than later - bring them. This is what I remember as I look down upon them on this magical night in Lübeck - shining in their moment of glory in front of a seemingly

respectful and awestruck (not to mention predominantly white and well-to-do) German audience. And I think that this is respect that they have quite rightly earned coming out of the harsh and alienating toughening-up process that China's acrobatic exchange put them through. And then I think that perhaps they were right about the promise that Circus of Africa would deliver, after all. Perhaps.

I haven't much time to ponder the matter however, because after the intermission the show starts up again gradually with a set of Bob Marley tunes belted out by the fedora-wearing lead singer of the band. At the end of his new style reggae remix, the singer – Mwaka - has ordered each and every member of the audience to grab their neighbour's hand so that "everyone can feel it… feel the spirit of togetherness." The middle-aged man one seat away from me - bearded, with glasses, and dressed all in black – does not take my hand, and actively avoids my attempt at eye contact, but instead privately nods his head with a committed sense of 'feeling'. I look down, and see that most people in the audience are obeying the commands of the band's leading man, though. I'm surprised and a bit impressed; thousands of aging excitement-craving spectators are holding hands and swaying in the air; not too far away, a longhaired woman has her eyes closed as she continuously pulsates to the beat of the band.

The show continues its domination of Lübeck's Stadhalle with two half-naked strong men - aptly described by the kingly 'African' M.C. as "Africa's Chippendales" – parading around and lifting each other's sweaty and muscular physiques for the sheer enjoyment of the audience's hungry eyes. "Elastic plastic" boys bend and contort themselves around each other in circles and then - quite literally - through

hoops, in a display of back-body flexibility that leaves even the most open-minded spectator perplexed. A doubles bounce juggling act defies the laws of gravity and utilizes a speed-of-light technique that drums up images of planetary motion as their silicone balls are manipulated with weightless force and dexterity. Hiwot's foot juggling act (like Abebe's - another traditional Chinese acrobatic act that has been 'Africanized' for the purposes of the show) has her extraordinary feet spinning a jar, a table, carpets, and then, finally, Maharene, all in a matter of a few entertaining - if not culinary – minutes. Tumblers propel their bodies from every direction to avoid the mind-boggling whirls of a giant red flag, another skill imported from China, being whipped around by one of the Habesha Jugglers. Some flute music and, of course, some more dance. Then Circus of Africa's version of comedy is presented, in which an innocent male audience member is lured to the stage only to have to perform the emasculating act of acting like a seductive and clandestine woman before having his shirt snatched off by one of the 'African', and overtly manly, clowns. His flesh is left exposed to the crowd before he is beaten again by one of the clowns in, first, a push-up, and second, a drumming, competition.

Then, for the finale, the M.C., whom I would come to know later as Nelson, comes out and introduces the acts one by one. During the introductions, the performers' names come second to making sure the audience knows which countries they're from. Nelson's "artists" are from "nine different African countries," as he clearly states to the crowd: South Africa, Zimbabwe, the Ivory Coast, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Djibouti, Kenya, and Zanzibar. The performers take to the stage for the last time this evening, and as they do, they wave their countries' flags as visual evidence of the authenticity of the show. Nelson sings and raps while the band backs him up, and the

cast grooves to the beat. In the middle of the song, he shouts out affirmations to the audience of "we are going at it African-style right here in your backyard!!!!" and "Lübeck, we love you!" A few lucky audience members are picked out of the crowd and pulled up onto the stage by the performers. They dance (some awkwardly, and others more freely) and enjoy their moment in the spotlight as they feel the "spirit of togetherness." Everyone feels it, it seems.

Fever

Nelson's interest in channelling the movements of African circus performers had been evident from the first time I spoke with him and he informed me that an outbreak of "African Fever," as he put it, had changed the rules of the European circus market entirely. "African Fever," as Nelson described it, was the recent and rapid increase of interest in African-themed circus (as well as music, and dance) performance that had been spreading like wildfire throughout Europe, particularly in Germany; a developing taste amongst European circus-goers for a more exotic and 'Africanized' version of circus, or, as Nelson put it, an appetite for something that was simply "different" from what they had seen before. Despite untouchably high skill levels, he said, the European public's eyes had grown tired of a circus market that was overly saturated with Russian and Chinese circus performers. Everybody had seen 'China' and 'Russia' before, he said. But they hadn't seen 'Africa'. And although, Nelson admitted, 'African' circus didn't offer its audience the same technical acrobatic intricacies that its Russian and Chinese counterparts did, what it did do, nonetheless, was bring an exhilarating energy to the stage that was so incredibly strong that its spectators were simply left with more excitement than they knew what to do with (he claimed he could count the number of times that Circus of Africa had *not* had a

standing ovation). In other words, the on-stage fever that was an integral part of an 'African' circus performance was so contagious that it transcended normal performer/audience boundaries and infected its European spectators. Confirming what Ras had said to me the first day I met him in Huáxīng, European audiences, according to Nelson, needed to see something "new." And now, Nelson undoubtedly believed, was the right time for 'African' circus in Europe.

"Too Chinese"

One of the first things that Ras told me when I met him in Huáxīng was that Nelson had asked the Habesha Jugglers to completely change the style of their acts from that of the first 'Chinese' style promotional CD they sent him, to a more 'African' style, because their acts were "too Chinese," and there were already too many Chinese in Germany. They gladly obliged him, and changed everything – costumes, music, movement, and props – with a preferential ease that Ras chalked up to the group's familiarity with 'African custom,' which could be held in opposition to that strange and different 'Chinese custom'. Ras further championed this shift, claiming that Europeans "need to see African performance (now). Maybe you can use this opportunity (for my research)…. Europeans for Africa." He mirrored Nelson when he said that Chinese acrobats had performed circus for a long time, and that Europeans were looking for something new. When I asked Ras why he thought this was true, he simply said, "I don't know. Only the audience knows why." As we talked some more, I looked over at one of the juggling jars that were normally (and 'traditionally') stencilled with dark blue Chinese type of designs. The Habesha Jugglers had added makeshift 'zebra stripes' out of black electrical tape, and Ras told me that, eventually,

when they had the resources, they planned on turning it into something even more 'African'. And true to their word, in Circus of Africa, they did.

China's acrobatic exchanges served as a liminal (Turner 1969) space in which props, costumes, music and choreographies could be transformed using minimal and affordable technologies: for example, the use of black electrical tape to make a "too Chinese" juggling jar "African"; or the relatively low expense of hiring digital video equipment for the purposes of making a promotional DVD (expenses that the Habesha Jugglers were able to afford at that point in China, whereas they wouldn't have yet been able to in Europe). When Nelson told me that changing the African circus performers' 'Chinese' style acts into something more 'African' was what he did, he cited Abebe's jar juggling act, and the Habesha Jugglers' club juggling act as examples in Circus of Africa's show. Jar juggling was a very traditional Chinese acrobatics act that happened to be Abebe's major at the Huáxīng School of Acrobatics. An Ethiopian specialty, on the other hand, club juggling was the skill practised the most by the Habesha Jugglers in Huáxīng, but the way they had 'learned' to perform it in China, however, it wasn't yet Africanized enough for the likes of Nelson. Crucially, the professional liminality and monetary equality of the exchanges had provided African circus performers with an opportunity to ensure Nelson of their commitment to moving culturally, which was even further reinforced upon their arrivals in Germany.

"African Power"

About a week after I joined Circus of Africa's tour, I was sitting in the audience of that day's venue with Abebe, watching the rehearsal and catching up. I asked him

what he thought about performing his jar juggling act with a kind of 'African' flair, even though it was originally a traditional Chinese act. It was a traditional Chinese act, Abebe told me, but the feeling he had when he was performing it was "African". "What does that mean, African feeling?" I inquired, to which Abebe responded, "I am happy. Happy. You understand now?"

The 'happiness' that Abebe referred to was re-articulated by Melaku one day when the two of us were sitting and talking in back of the audience of the venue we were going to perform at that night. He asked me if I didn't get bored watching the show over and over again. I said no – that I felt, for instance, at the beginning of last night, very tired, but by the finale, really inspired. He then asked if I "got energy from the stage." I said yes. He replied that a lot of people told him the same thing. He started explaining to me that the energy the audience "gets" can be attributed to the difference between "White circus" and "African circus." He said that a White circus doesn't "give energy." When I asked why, he said that in a White circus, every mistake has a "big value," and that everything has to be perfect; if the performer makes a mistake, you can see it from very far away (he sited Höhepunkt[95] as an example that he could identify). In an African circus if someone makes a mistake, it's "no problem!" (Melaku said this as he mimicked club juggling, dancing, and put a big smile on). He also told me that in a White circus, the audience knows exactly where to clap and when, whereas African circus has an element of unpredictability to it. Melaku called this "African power."

[95] Höhepunkt was a well-known German circus.

On another occasion, during an evening performance I took the opportunity to interview a freelance journalist, Dirk, who also happened to be one of the local promoters associated with the venue we were at that night. Having seen Circus of Africa at the same venue last year, he was very excited that the show was doing so well. When I asked him what he attributed all of the success to, he said, "I think they're real… really authentic… that's what the people like. It's colourful, joyful, lots of happiness." He also stated they were different from anything else, pointing out, in particular, that they had a "different style of the hair… black clothes (meaning 'African' style)." He added:

> Of course I don't know if they celebrate it in Africa like this, but it seems like it's real…. I don't want to double question it… it looks fantastic – the guys living it, celebrating it every night…. Loving it and living it…. (And it's a show) without one white man. And it's great to have them here, and I think it's great for the audience as well.

Then he asked me, "So all these nations work together?" I nodded. "That's great (that) they (the Africans) show the Germans… (that they're) not just murdering each other… (and that they're from Africa and) they're working together."

What Abebe experienced as 'happiness', became "African Power" from Melaku's point of view then extended into a musical diplomacy in the eyes of one local promoter. Having a different interpretation, the show's South African lead singer, Naledi, partly attributed the flexible enthusiasm of Circus of Africa's performances to the fact that she could be herself in the show more than she ever could in real life. During a somewhat formal interview,[96] Naledi told me that it felt like she was performing her culture in Circus of Africa: "I'm showing myself to them… exposing so much from my culture… (and) when I'm showing myself, I'm at my most naked

[96] Conducted before I knew her well.

position." After all, "they (the audience) are coming to the circus to see how Africans do circus." She mentioned the terms erotic, exotic, wild, fun, enthusiastic, when she said, "now this is how Africans do it," and emphasized the originality of how Africans *do* do it, by saying that it wasn't good to be a copycat. I asked Naledi why she thought that this particular moment found African circus rising, and she said that, "Africans have gotten the chance now to live their dreams…we've always adapted… (but now we get to) live who we are." Now, Naledi stated, the old songs and dances could take her back to the time of her grandparents: "We are recapturing that (life) as a younger generation," and "I'm living, in a way, that life, better than I would be if I was living at home." She attributed this to the fact that "the director (Nelson) dug everything from our cultures, our past," but added that "it's not like it's (the culture) dying – it's (just) on hold." "This performance is taking me back," she romantically exclaimed. But when I asked her if the past she says she was being taken back to, was how she remembered her childhood in South Africa, she said it wasn't really like that that much then.

Towards the end of the tour, an Austrian newspaper ran an article stating that Circus of Africa's publicity posters were racist (i.e., they placed great emphasis on guaranteeing the audience an "exotic" show "of the senses", etc.), and as a result ticket sales virtually doubled after it went to press. Nelson took advantage of the rise in public curiosity over the so-called exploited and exotic sexy 'Africans' on display; firstly, he added a second performance for the day we were in that particular city, and secondly, he sent an email in which he thanked the reporter for all of his sales help. Later on, when he told me about the incident, Nelson laughed at what he clearly

perceived to be his triumph in the situation, and he felt neither the need to justify, nor defend himself against, the journalist's finger-wagging accusatory comments.

Theatrical and promotional use of self-deprecating sexual puns, and animal-like imagery (i.e., Nelson screaming out at the end of each show, "We're doing it African-style, right here in your backyard!!!"), at once conciliatory and disrespectful to audiences, were, in small doses, beneficial in terms of selling the show. Rather than dwelling on the possibility that Circus of Africa was presenting a reified version of 'Africa', Nelson saved all of his reflexive or self-analytical energy for the realm of comprehending the circumstances surrounding the show's monetary/publicity successes and failures, and as the show's proprietor, he obviously knew what he was doing. The overtly negative reaction that the Austrian journalist had to Circus of Africa's feverishly hot-blooded advertising techniques was an exceptional one; most of the attention the show received was incredibly positive, and, in fact, quite praiseworthy of the spectacle for being such an energetic and 'authentic' expression of so-called 'African' culture.

Cultures

Unlike Naledi's, and many other members of the public's responses to Circus of Africa, the majority of the production's performers that I spoke with didn't feel they were expressing 'African' culture during the show. Nor did they feel as if they were compromising or exploiting it either (Ras, for instance, told me that he didn't "think this is (his) culture" when he was club juggling - that the performance was for the performance, not for his "life"), even if, for the purposes of diversifying the show, they took on a new nationality entirely.

After joining the tour, it was a matter of days before I discovered that a handful of the show's artists were not really from the countries that the circus claimed they were when, during the finale, Nelson announced the performers by name,[97] and they entered the stage waving the respective flags of their countries.[98] The band was not really from Zanzibar - they were from Tanzania. The bounce juggling act was not from Djibouti - they were actually from Ethiopia. Abasi was from Tanzania – not Uganda as he was announced as being from. And not all of the female dancers were from Zimbabwe – one, eighteen-year-old Tawa, was also from Tanzania. In terms of catering to market desires, there were apparently too many performers from Tanzania and Ethiopia in Circus of Africa.

One evening, in the dressing room before the show, I asked Tawa if she minded the audiences thinking she was from Zimbabwe. She immediately, with a young girl's laugh, said that it was "no problem" for her. She told me, quite matter-of-factly, that there were simply too many performers in Circus of Africa who were from Tanzania, and that the only problem concerning her nationality shape-shifting was that, a few times after the show, someone from Zimbabwe had come up to her speaking in Ndebele. Unable to understand what they were saying, she told them that, although she's originally from Zimbabwe, she actually grew up in Tanzania, and therefore spoke only Swahili and English.

[97] Which were usually the stage names, and not the actual names, of the person, or group he was calling.
[98] Flag waving is a fairly common circus practice, especially as part of international competitions where the performers arrive from around the globe.

The Ethiopian doubles bounce juggling act, Nassir and Dawit, had a different response to the situation at hand. Nassir was the only artist in Circus of Africa who had expressed to me that he had any negative feelings about pretending to be from another country. When Nelson initially asked them to present their act as being from Eritrea, at first they said no. The duo thought that if Ethiopian people saw the show, they would think Nassir and Dawit, as 'Eritreans', hated Ethiopia because of the conflict between the (now) two separate countries. Nelson explained why he was making such a request – that there were too many Ethiopians in the show – and eventually they had a change of heart, and agreed to do it as long as they wouldn't become 'Eritrean'. After a bit of bartering, the trio agreed that Djibouti would be a fair, and neutral enough, compromise as far as the show went. When I asked Nassir how he felt about publicly pretending he was from Djibouti each night, he told me that every night it was, "not a good feeling," and that he "must change (this) soon." He believed that if he said he was from Ethiopia, he would help to draw attention to his country; a country, as he said, that was plagued by a longstanding reputation for drought, and war.[99] If he represented Ethiopia, he would be doing his country a service by showing that Ethiopia had a lot more going on in it than its infamous hungers and conflicts; that Ethiopians could be, and in fact were, much more than capable of surpassing the expectations set by two-dimensional international media depictions of them. Nassir, Dawit, and their extraordinary circus skills were certainly proof of that. But in terms of the audiences in Europe, Nassir told me that he thought they didn't really care at all about whether he was from Ethiopia or Eritrea or Djibouti; places which were, according to Nassir, all the same to them.

[99] Nassir also thought that it wasn't good for him professionally because people were starting to know him around Europe as a performer from Djibouti rather than Ethiopia.

Sounds

The audience's inability to distinguish between a person from Djibouti and a person from Ethiopia was not unique to the audiences of that year's tour. Circus of Africa's German sound designer, Fritz, told me that the previous year's tour also fictionalized the national identities of some of the show's performers. At times, Fritz mildly exaggerated, those labels changed day-to-day because Nelson would forget where someone was supposed to come from. When I asked him why he thought Nelson made these changes, Fritz answered that it was "more interesting for the audience if you can say they're from different countries." And, apparently, a cosmopolitan Nelson had, through years of international experience, figured out just what the right blend of 'Africa' would be in order to satisfy the tastes of his German audience.

Some of Circus of Africa's employees, including Fritz, took an equally pragmatic approach in tinkering with the level of 'African-ess' in the show. One afternoon, during the lighting check, Fritz told me that he and the band recently had a discussion about the differences between "how the African sound should be, and how the Europeans want to hear it." For the European ear, Fritz said, the bass drum was the bass drum, but in African music, the bass guitar was often doing the same job as the bass drum would have been doing in European music. The solution they arrived at involved finding some kind of middle ground; a sound that was okay for the ears of European audiences, but a sound that would also sound like "African sound" (i.e., a guitar, loud in European music, would also become loud in Circus of Africa's African repertoire).

Fritz explained to me that he was just doing what the audience wanted. When I asked him how he determined what the audience wanted, he jokingly said that if it was what he wanted to hear then it was what the audience would want to hear as well. And, he added, that he would only change what he was doing with the music in Circus of Africa if Nelson told him to - not if the band objected to his professional musical choices. I asked Fritz if he felt that the production showcased 'African' culture. He said no, because a lot of the elements (like foot juggling) were not "typically African." But when I asked him what something "typically African" would be, Fritz, who was quite puzzled, anthropologically responded, "That's the problem."

In parallel to the innovation of 'African' music to adapt to the tastes of European audiences, there was a selection of so-called 'African' items (i.e. jewellery, clothing, and knick-knacks) at a table in the lobby for sale before the show, during intermission, and at the end of each performance. When I asked one of the German crew members, Gerda, about the sources for the products, she told me that Nelson brought some of them from Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, and Tanzania, but that the 'African' beaded bracelets (made in China) were actually brought back from a trip to Mongolia by Tsetseg. One item – a sculpture - was from Indonesia. "But we don't tell people that," Gerda told me with a laugh.

Solving the "problem" of what was "typically African" was a job largely carried out by Nelson, whose extensive role as Artistic Director, Producer, Promoter, Agent, and M.C. of Circus of Africa had him essentially overseeing all aspects of the show. Whilst in collaboration with other specialists (i.e., lighting and sound technicians, caterers, etc.), Nelson determined what would appeal to the senses of European

audiences, which frequently involved playing with notions of "difference" or, as I suggest, the 'cultural' "as a marker of difference" [Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion & Rees 2008: 108]) in performance. However, to imply that the process of reconfiguring and innovating cultural movements in Circus of Africa occurred either with a particular consciousness or thoughtfulness on the part of Nelson would be misleading. Wrought with the logistics of an international tour to contend with, Nelson was prone to acting on his habitual and "quick," shark-like instincts - for better or worse – when it came to making aesthetic choices about the show.

Value

Aside from his expertise in cultivating the spirit of 'Africa' onstage, Nelson was one of just a few players who knew that there were "too many" 'Chinese' acrobatics acts being performed in Germany, and that 'African' style circus performances were more "rare." This type of knowledge had been acquired by him largely through personal experience, including an extensive, international first career as a circus performer, that had given him a sufficient taste of what it meant to be 'culturally flexible' as an African entertainer. After having undergone that initiation himself, he was able to more successfully participate in the act of culturally reconfiguring (Ong 2005: 338) his 'African' circus show, and its performers' acts in the name of artistic innovation, and always with an eye towards profit. Inevitably this involved the skilled appropriation and assemblage of various key materials including, but not limited to, 'cultures', props, music, and bodies, into a bricolage that showcased reconfigured elements of 'African' culture in new and innovative ways.

Nelson, as a former circus performer, shared a form of artistic identity with his cast. On top of that, the fact that he was originally from Zimbabwe gave him a definite leg up when it came to working with other artists from Africa particularly. First of all, it gave him the authority to pursue an aesthetically 'Africanized' show without being questioned along the lines of cultural authenticity or his own personal motivation. So Nelson talked just as confidently about changing the 'Chinese' style acts of the Sudanese from something that "everybody has seen before" into performances that they could call "their own," as he had when he insisted the Habesha Jugglers 'Africanize' their acts to secure a contract with him in China. Secondly, he had a general, if not a very exact, sense of where his performers were coming from, and accordingly, what they needed to be satisfied with their job. This enabled Nelson to employ his artists with relatively cushy salaries, and to do his best to provide the conditions they would need to establish loyalty to him.[100] Melaku testified to Nelson's mindfulness of his artists' needs, saying that Nelson was a good promoter compared with most others. When I asked him why, Melaku told me that Nelson gave "value" to his artists, and that other promoters "don't give us value… they pay us, but they don't give us value. What is that?" To give a concrete example of what he meant, Melaku mentioned that the had stayed in very "bad hotels" last season with Circus of Africa, but that Nelson was "right there with them," and that it was clear, through that gesture, that Nelson felt he was on the same level as the people he employed. Melaku also mentioned that other European circuses and promoters the Habesha Jugglers worked with, contrary to Nelson, had "closed the door in our faces" and refused to help when the group encountered problems with their visas. He quickly related this to

[100] When compared with small shows in Europe, and certainly when compared with circuses in Ethiopia. The largest African-themed circus in Europe, 'Oh, Africa!', paid its lowest-paid artists virtually double what Nelson paid his artists in Circus of Africa. Since he represented a handful of 'Oh, Africa!'s performers, however, Nelson received 20 percent of their weekly pay as an agent.

the fact that the circuses didn't like "black people," and for that reason Melaku was "feeling bad."

There was a sense of camaraderie that drove the relationships Nelson had with "his" artists. He had been like them. He sometimes stayed with them. He knew what their needs were. He demonstrated that they had something greater to aspire to beyond short-lived, albeit exciting, international careers as circus performers (one day they, too, could become high-powered, wealthy, cosmopolitan circus promoters/producers/agents). And as he did so, he gave them a "value" beyond the money he paid them; a value that was indeterminable by other agents who shared neither the professional nor the cultural history that his artists perceived him as sharing with them. However, and as I will convey throughout the rest of the thesis, as someone who valued his artists but had no qualms in manoeuvring them about opportunistically in the process of exploiting ideas about 'African' 'cultures' and bodies, Nelson also embodied many of the moral and cultural ambiguities articulated in historical accounts of circus (Stoddart 2000; Kwint 1994), "which has always been *constitutionally international*, and at the same time, *strategically xenophobic*" (Stoddart 2000: 71, emphasis mine).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented ethnography that showed how onstage acts of cultural reconfiguration involving 'Africanizing' people, props, sounds, and objects for display in Circus of Africa, was inspired by a growing market desire in Europe for 'African' circus. The general inability of a modern German audience to differentiate between a performer from Ethiopia and a performer from Djibouti, and a circus

proprietor's, such as Nelson's, eagerness to capitalize on this form of cultural ignorance and/or naivety, is reminiscent of the early days of American circus when, for example, a Native American would be employed to portray a Chinese person in front of the eyes of an unknowing U.S. audience, who easily fell for the switcheroo (Davis 2002). In many cases, American circus arenas provided the stage for an audience's first encounter with people from another, far away, land (ibid.). Circus of Africa gave its European audiences a similar opportunity – just upping the level of sophistication for a group that, nowadays, might be able to distinguish between a Native American and a Chinese person, but not between a Tanzanian and a Zimbabwean, or an Ethiopian and someone from Djibouti. This powerful display of 'illusory' 'African' diversity in the show was complemented when performers, promoters, anthropologists, and audience members alike got "energy" from the celebratory ethos that dominated Circus of Africa's performances. This "energy" was generated by the artists who were "loving it and living it," and was praised as a unique and "happy" quality, that was distinctly 'African' in its essence. Potentially critical discourses that aimed to target the eroticisation of exploited 'African' performers in the show unwittingly drew in larger audiences who needed to "see" 'Africa' it in order to believe it (an appeal to the primacy and trustworthiness of the visual proof that circus has long offered spectators across time and space [Assael 2005; Hippisley Coxe 1980: 225]). Likewise, literary attempts to expose the real 'Africa' beneath the 'wild' and 'exotic' spectacle, were trumped by the thrilling event of witnessing "African Power" in an unpredictable, live, encounter of moving bodies (Stoddart 2000: 6; Tait 2005: 141) and cultures. The thrilling experience of live bodies assembled within a bricolage of 'African' circus movements, may have pulled some spectators into culturally rooted discussions or responses, but it didn't

necessarily have the same impact on the show's performers. Sometimes the "value" that Nelson instilled in his artists when he treated them as comrades, even when they were staying in "bad conditions," encouraged them to take pleasure in cultural flexibility; for example the Habesha Jugglers embraced the process of changing their 'Chinese' acts into 'African' ones in order to secure the contract with Circus of Africa. At other times a different situation would have been preferential such as when Nassir believed it would be better if the audience knew him as an Ethiopian. Most of the time, however, the performers seemed fairly indifferent; think of Tawa's response to 'being' from Zimbabwe: it was "no problem." But however differently they may have felt about 'culturally' compromising or adapting to suit the needs of the show, one thing was clear: they all agreed to do it.

CHAPTER SIX

The Tour

Introduction: 'Us' and 'Them'

Hidden from the eyes of Circus of Africa's spectators, was the actual behind the scenes life on tour; and that life had much more to do with day-to-day logistics than it did to do with the politics of aesthetics of 'African' circus performance. In chapter five I focused on the onstage production of Circus of Africa as it pertained to complicity amongst the African artists in culturally reconfiguring their performances per Nelson's insistence for the sake of the show's profitability. In this chapter I move to the 'back stage' life of the 'African' themed show as it related to the dynamics between the 'African artists' and the 'German production crew', which were heavily influenced by racialized notions of 'difference'. The stereotypes the Habesha Jugglers played to in Europe bled over into backstage life. Crewmembers perceived the artists as embodiments of binary stereotypes similar to the ones that had been projected onto them in China. The African artists were made aware by the off stage behaviour of the technicians, the gaze of the audiences during performance, the reactions of the public in the towns, and the logistics of the production operations that there was "no such possibility in an antiblack world (for them to be perceived as human) because a black person is immediately caught out there by white eyes in the visual field of human perception as either hypervisible or invisible as Ralph Ellison articulates in *Invisible Man*" (Mahendran 2007: 193). Europe began to resemble China in that individual and

national identities mattered little in comparison to what it meant to be 'African' according to the *European* gaze, and the Habesha Jugglers and other African circus performers continued to have to navigate and strategize within the confines of fixed racial stereotypes and representations, on stage and off. The on tour relationship between the "technicians" and the "artists" swiftly morphed into an encounter between the "Germans" and the "Africans." But running counter to this racially based divide was the propensity, just as in China, for the African artists to privilege culturally hybrid forms of identity that emphasized a negotiation of ethnicity amongst and between themselves as one unified, though divided, segregated group of artists (Back 1996).

At the point I jumped on board the tour, Circus of Africa performed in venues (usually small halls and theatres) rather than in a tent.[101] The show played at a different venue pretty much every night, most right in the city's centre, and the buses we lived on drove at night while we slept on beds in the upstairs, in order to reach the next day's venue. Life on tour involved moving from one city to another, show load in and out, lighting and sound checks, rehearsals, cooking and eating. Basically it was a lot of daily moving around of all the pieces of the puzzle, and involved massive amounts of organization and cooperation on the parts of the cast, crew, management and local labour support in order to make it all happen. The artists in the cast all came from six different African countries: Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the Ivory Coast. The small crew of technicians, or crewmembers, were all German. The show was co-produced by Nelson, who was often on tour with us, and a German man named Jürgen, whose company was Feuerwehrhaus

[101] There was a period of about one month at the beginning of the tour when the show was in a tent.

Produktionen (Firehouse Productions). Jürgen very occasionally stopped by to catch a show on tour, but I only met him twice when I was there.

Two of the three live-in buses on the tour moved and housed all of the artists. The first one, "bus number one," was more commonly known as the "mixed bus," and it carried mostly female performers, but it also housed a few of the overflow male artists because there wasn't enough room on the second bus - "bus number two," or the "boys' bus" – which housed most of the male artists who worked on the show. The last bus was bus "number three," aka the "crew bus." That was the bus that I lived on. The crew bus housed the technicians, Nelson, Tsetseg, and myself. The crew bus usually left last each night to travel because the crew had to unload the entire tech from the show each night, a process that generally took around two hours to complete. Then they would clean up and shower in the venue before we took off. Although I lived on the crew bus, during the tour I was much closer with the artists than I was with the technicians. After one of the residents on that bus went home (about one month after my arrival on Circus of Africa), a bed on the mixed bus opened up, and the girls invited me to come live with them.[102] I seriously considered it, because it would have been socially much more comfortable for me. After all, I spent the majority of my daytime in their company in one respect or another. On the other hand, outside of when we were on the crew bus, I barely spoke with the technicians (with the exception of Fritz, who was a key interlocutor of mine). For example, I used the female dressing rooms as my base in the venues most of the time, even though the crew had invited me to stay in the technicians' room.[103] In the end I decided that, were I to move in with the artists, I would lose most of my access to listening and

[102] The male artists also invited me to live with them, but, for obvious reasons, I declined.
[103] Later on in the tour, Dietrich would mark out an office for me occasionally.

participating in conversations with the crew. Looking back, my decision in the situation was wise because the access I obtained from staying on the crew bus provided me with the extremely valuable insights from which most of the content of this chapter arises.

On the tour, daily life was extremely methodical. This was essential, given the amount of movement that was happening all around us all of the time. The crew woke up first everyday, and started the load in process around 7 am. This included lighting, sound, and stage. By the time that the first of the artists began to wake, it was around 9 am. At that point, arrowed signs would have already been placed around the venue to indicate to the artists which direction to go for what (i.e. dressing rooms, catering area, laundry area, offices). A production/rehearsal schedule would have been set up as well. All activities that had to do with the cast started after lunch, and some of the cast slept until the afternoon after staying up all night socializing on the buses. For those artists who did arise on the earlier side of things, they were free to spend the day as they pleased. Many chose to walk around whatever city we were in, and one of the most common questions to hear before noon was “which way is the town?” This was *the* question, even when we were located in the midst of a sprawling metropolis such as Berlin. In asking this question, one was basically inquiring as to the location of the high street in that city. The cast, when not out and about in “town” spent the rest of the day inside the venue. There were sound and lighting checks for the artists, which were essential because the venues almost always changed on a daily basis. Every act also had a fixed rehearsal slot to practice on the stage. Usually there were several acts rehearsing at once, and again this time was important because each day they were met with a new stage and a decidedly different space to inhabit. On a typical day there was

one show in the evening (two shows per day on weekends), after which the artists would change, shower, and return to the buses before we departed for our next destination.

Local promoters, who had bought the Circus of Africa show at a fixed price, were required to provide a certain amount/kind of food, showers and towels, dressing rooms, and the like, for the artists in the venue. All food was provided for on the production. Breakfast was an array of staples, whereas lunch and dinner were both catered. Two cooks lived and travelled with us. Mapenzi was a chef from Nelson's acrobatics school in Dar es Salaam, and she cooked an African style lunch for the artists. Dinner for the artists was packed leftovers from the lunch, and was consumed on the artists' buses late at night after the show. Lukas was a German cook who cooked German fare for both lunch and dinner for the German crew. Nelson, Tsetseg, and myself ate both types of food. The German crew only ate the German food (although I was told they could have partaken of the African cuisine whenever they wanted). The African artists were only permitted to eat the African food, unless they got a special okay from Nelson to have Lukas' cooking.

On Circus of Africa's tour, there were two major groups often acknowledged by my interlocutors as being different from one another: the "German crew" and the "Africans artists." There were also the subgroups within the artists, which were defined in terms of nationality. The artists, Nelson, and myself acknowledged these national groupings as such. The technicians, like the school administration in Huáxīng, only used the term "Africans" when referring to any of the artists. A number of different organizational tactics concerning logistics drew on these sub-categories as

a means of solution. For example, prop boxes and the weekly laundry list (i.e. who could use the washer/dryer on which day of the week) were often labelled with the artist's nationality (i.e. 'Ethiopians', 'Zimbabwe'), but sometimes they were labelled with the name of the act instead (i.e. 'contortion').

Almost all of Circus of Africa's employees spoke a basic amount of English (except for one or two of the artists from the Ivory Coast), and it was the unofficial show language. The crewmembers were all German, and would speak in German with each other, and in English when they communicated with the artists, Nelson, or myself. The other languages spoken on the tour were Swahili (Tanzanians, and Kenyans), French (Ivory Coasteans), Amharic (Ethiopians), Tigrinya (Ethiopians), Ndebele (Zimbabweans), Zulu (South Africans), and bits and pieces of other local dialects (most of the individual artists were the only ones from their respective regions, and so they couldn't dialogue with anyone else in their local dialect). Although English was the main spoken language, everyone on the show became familiar with some key phrases in German, and Swahili, and some people learned bits of other languages as well.

Buses

In Circus of Africa, not unlike in Huáxīng, the crew generally referred to the "artists" as "Africans" (whether they were from Ethiopia, Tanzania, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, or the Ivory Coast),[104] and misunderstandings were often carelessly linked to the so-called cultural tendencies of the bunch as a legitimate and distinctive ethnic 'African' group. One night on the tour, for example, Nassir agreed to look at some of

[104] Most of the time.

the photos I had taken of his act. It was late, around 11:30 pm, and while most of the performers had already changed, showered, and headed back to their respective buses to eat dinner and socialize, the crew was still busy unloading the day's venue. I grabbed Nassir from the boys' bus, and we headed for the crew bus, which promised a quieter and more spacious environment for the task at hand. Dietrich[105] was busy on the downstairs level of the bus working quietly on his laptop. Nassir and I ascended the tight staircase to the upstairs, and made our way to the back of the bus, where a soft mahogany leather couch was awaiting our arrival. We sat down and Nassir listened to the music streaming from his MP3, while I fidgeted with my terminally ill laptop. As we waited for the photos to load, Gerda climbed the stairs, and met us with a stare so cold that it could have quelled a volcano's fire. Without saying a word, she turned away, and headed quickly towards the front of the bus. Not far behind Gerda was Olaf, a technician, who bounded up the steps and, in his eternal search for food, grabbed a sandwich from his bed. He turned around and started to make for the lounge area (where we were seated) but, instead, stopped dead in his tracks. Olaf glared at Nassir and me, then dramatically rolled his eyes and stormed off huffing and puffing downstairs. Something was clearly wrong, and I ventured to guess what it was. I walked up to Gerda, who was by her bed re-organizing the contents of her suitcase. I asked her if there was some sort of rule that no one had clued me in on, about cast members not being allowed on the crew bus. She replied that there was no explicit rule about it, but that it was a kind of unspoken and assumed rule, to which she added that none of the crew members had ever brought a Circus of Africa artist onto the bus before, so none of them ever had to discuss such matters before. I quite defensively suggested to her that, in the future, if I was breaking a rule (spoken or

[105] Aside from Nelson and Tsetseg, Dietrich was the only member of the crew who didn't participate in the 'tear down' each night.

unspoken), it would probably be easiest just to tell me outright so I didn't have to try and figure out what I had done wrong. Gerda responded that she hadn't said anything because she thought that maybe it was just her who felt this way.

Feeling flustered, I went back to Nassir and told him that we should probably go somewhere else to look at the photos. His eyes were pointed down towards the floor, and, considering the undeniably negative reaction of Gerda and Olaf to his presence on the bus, he seemed fairly nonplussed. I, however, was shocked. I wondered what his thoughts were about all of this, and I wondered if he was used to these sorts of incidences. But before we even managed to stand up, Dietrich (after having had a downstairs encounter with Olaf) popped his head upstairs. He was about to say something about Nassir being on the bus, when I (rather tactlessly) blurted out that I didn't know beforehand that we weren't supposed to have "other" people on the bus, but now I did, and so we were leaving immediately. Off to the boys' bus Nassir and I went, where we finally looked at those photos.

Later on that night, I stood outside the bus smoking cigarettes with Ras, and relayed that night's incident with the technicians to him. He said that the problem was that Nelson wasn't there (he was in Tanzania). Even Dietrich was "small in front of Nelson." Ras told me that the crew were the ones with the problems. He invited me to stay on their bus, adding that even Nelson and Tsetseg don't like to stay with the crew. They didn't like to eat with them either, Ras said. Quite often they passed up munching the German fare, and instead partook in consuming Mapenzi's home cooked Tanzanian food. And they didn't like to spend time with "the Germans," Ras said matter-of-factly, explaining that the cause for their aversion was due to the fact

that there was something "wrong about the German mind." The following day this sentiment was backed up by Naledi, who agreed that the behaviour of the crew was undoubtedly racist. She told me it was commonly understood amongst Africans who had immigrated to Germany, that Germans, in general, are "racist" and "strange." The technicians seemed to have a different take on the matter, however. When I confronted him about his reaction to the situation, Olaf justified himself by saying that the crew bus was like a private space in which "no one (meaning the artists of Circus of Africa) needs to know what we have (i.e. laptops, and other valuables)." For emphasis he added: "*They* have *their* bus, and *we* have *ours*."

A few days after this incident, Olaf's German girlfriend, whom nobody had been introduced to beforehand and without prior warning, stayed for several days with us on the crew bus (amidst everyone's laptops and valuables), but no one seemed to have a problem with it at all. Ras told me later on that many of the male artists wanted to fight Olaf, or "the son of Hitler" as Ras called him, over the frequent inappropriate racist behaviour he was known to exhibit. Olaf was the only technician who was overtly disliked by the majority of Circus of Africa's artists, but over the course of the tour, I sat in on a number of conversations with other crew members that demonstrated a vast and, at times, unsettling cultural gap between the "artists" and the "crew," better known as the "Africans" and the "Germans." Most of the technicians were unsure of how to (or even if they wanted to, it appeared) bridge this divide.

There were many occasions when the technicians were discussing the artists, and rather than using that term – 'artists' – instead they used the term "Africans" as a label for the group. The following example is case in point: it was late at night in the crew

bus. We were already on the road, and a few of us were sitting downstairs, drinking beer and chatting about the tour. Fritz, who was more than a little bit tipsy, was complaining about how the "Africans" were always crashing their newly purchased laptops. This was not the first time that he had voiced his opinion about the matter; after all, Fritz was the person they would come to in order to fix their broken machines. He said that he was so experienced at fixing laptops now that he could get a job as a computer repair technician. Fritz identified the primary two reasons that caused the artists to bring him their laptops as the following: the artists hit the 'okay', or 'yes to all' response without knowing what they were agreeing to (causing the computer to crash), and the artists bought German laptops, requiring Fritz to change the language to English or French[106] (i.e., when purchased in Germany, Windows XP only comes in German), a literal impossibility he said, although he still felt obligated to make an attempt. On the last tour, the technicians laughed as they told me, the "Africans" were all buying mobiles and MP3s, but now they've upgraded to laptops. On a later occasion, Fritz reasoned with me about this, stating that "it's not normal there (in Africa)," and "here (in Germany) it's normal," for people to own things like mobiles, MP3s, and laptops. Africans didn't know how to use them, Fritz said, and then added that, "they don't need" them for work, or business, they only use them to watch DVDs, and use the Internet. Like the majority of European or American families who owned laptops, I asked him. Fritz replied that in Africa it was unusual to have this technology, and that, in Africa, it was even unusual to have the money to buy it. He said that some of the performers in Circus of Africa saved every penny they had earned so they could go back to Africa to build a house, and not work for a year.

[106] French was the technological language of choice for the artists who came from the Ivory Coast.

And then he abruptly changed the topic and said that racism in Germany infuriated him.

The topic of conversation shifted gears from technology in Africa, and the crew started talking about how disorganized the truck loading process was for the Africans. Part of the male artists' jobs included loading and unloading the props for the daily show. The process generally took less than an hour for each part, and was initially performed by the artists as a group. Around the middle of the tour, the cast was divided into two arbitrary groups (decided by the artists) that would do the job, and switch every other day. By the end of the tour, however, the two groups had been re-divided (again, by the artists) into three groups that were based on nationality (Ethiopians, Tanzanians/Kenyans, Ivory Coast). Every night the artists loaded the props differently, the technicians agreed with frustration. This was a very inefficient method, they thought, because the props wound up in a precarious position in the trolley, which meant that they could be damaged during the night's drive. Rafael, who was the principle driver of the main large truck and was responsible for overseeing the loading/unloading of the crew's equipment, on the other hand, was extremely organized. He loaded the truck once, and then remembered exactly how everything should go. Near the beginning of the tour, Rafael had given the artists a list of how the props should be loaded, but they had never made use of it; so when Dietrich asked the Stage Manager, Werner, to teach the "Africans" how to load the props properly, he refused because the "Africans" obviously couldn't learn how to do it right. I asked him why he thought the "Africans" couldn't learn how to do it right, and he told me that he didn't know, but he just thought that the "Africans" looked "confused." Fritz interjected saying that it was like when you would try to explain, and they didn't get

it, and then you started to get really, really angry and frustrated. The crew did admit, however, that since Ras had been crowned "father"[107] at the end of last year's tour, the prop handling had managed to become a tad bit smoother.

The crew's frustration with "Africans" who couldn't rightly decipher what their own culturally-determined needs should have been, was exacerbated by what seemed to the German crew to be an impenetrable confusion affecting the "Africans," who proved to be a danger in terms of maintaining the integrity of personal belongings (e.g., laptops) and props for the show. The important thing here was that the language used by the crew to talk about such problems - problems of difference that may have been, in other circumstances, attributed to the shared professional characteristics of a group hired to perform a particular job, or the temperament of an individual artist on the tour - were centred on racialized conceptions of ethnicity, and identifiable by the colour of a person's skin.

Evidenced in the actions of the crew, the difficulties that the African artists experienced in handling their personal belongings and props properly was only a small part of the problem; the greater difficulty was in maintaining that sense of comfortable space between the two groups that, I've already shown, was a major issue on tour. It was late at night one night, around 5 am, and I was downstairs on the crew bus, finishing up a proposal for Nelson. Everyone else on the bus was asleep, including the driver,[108] and I had my headphones on in order to politely listen to the vibrant and energizing music that was pumping loudly from my laptop. That was why

[107] The artists in Circus of Africa often called Ras "father" partly because of his non-official leadership position, which involved the oversight of prop loading and some props handling during the show.
[108] Normally we would have been driving throughout the night, but because our next destination was fairly close to where we had been the day before, we weren't going to leave until early that morning.

it was such a long time before I heard the banging at the window. When I finally did hear it, I quickly got up and opened the locked tour bus door. Standing before me were Zulan, the South African choreographer and lead dancer in the show, and Idogbe, one of the drummers from the Ivory Coast. They were clearly drunk, and laughing unabashedly. I was happy for the distraction from writing, and went outside to join them for a while. They had been drinking all night, and had seen me working through the window from outside the bus. We joked around for a bit, until I eventually went back to face my PR assignment, and forgot all about the encounter. Until the next day.

The next morning, I was wandering through the unexplored venue, in search of the catering area. I entered a hallway, and bumped into Fred, the bass player for 'Papa Africa' and the "captain" of the boys' bus. He asked me if I knew who knocked on the crew bus last night. Surprised that he knew of the incident, I said yes. Who was it, he asked me. I said that I didn't want to get anyone into trouble, and refused to say. Fred explained that Fritz had come to him in the morning, fuming mad, and told him that someone had been pounding on the crew bus for two minutes late last night. Half of the crew had woken up from it, he said, but I was still adamant about protecting the identities of the late-night knockers. Apparent that I wasn't going to crack, Fred asked me, several times, whether or not it was Ras.[109] Even though I told him repeatedly no, Fred asked me to officially promise it wasn't. I did. Then he told me that because I wasn't going to tell him who had done it, I must deal with Fritz myself. No problem, I said. I left Fred, and went up to the stage straight away to confront Fritz, who was

[109] He wanted to know for several reasons: first, because Ras was my closest friend on tour, and second, because the band (specifically one of the drummers, Babu) disliked him.

helping guide the stagehands in the process of loading in.[110] I told him that Fred had spoken with me about what had happened, and I told him that it wasn't who he probably thought it was (Ras). Fritz went on an angry tirade that, arguably, blew the incident entirely out of proportion. He was like a whining child masquerading as a rabid dog, I thought. Glossing over his emotional reaction, I asked Fritz if he wanted to talk with the culprits himself, or if he preferred me to talk with them as a sort of mediator. He said that I should talk with them for him, and tell them never to let this happen again, because if he had to deal with them face to face, he just might get aggressive.

Within a fairly short time, I spotted Idogbe, pulled him aside, and relayed Fritz's message to him. I made it quite clear, however, that I didn't share the reaction of the crew to his behaviour, and that the primary reason I was even telling him about it was because I wanted to resolve the technicians' anger without revealing who had caused the disturbance. Idogbe quietly said okay, and gave me an uncomfortable smile. Later on, when I saw Tsetseg outside of the venue talking on a bench with Gerda, I grabbed him and gave him the run down. Zulan was less shy about his response than Idogbe had been; he laughed unhappily, and in a way that made me think that he was not surprised at all by the crew's (over)reaction. I told Fritz that I had talked with all the 'guilty' parties, but without telling them he had threatened bodily harm if there was a second offense; I didn't think that telling them that would have been a scary or effective enough of a threat to keep them from repeating the incident, I (sort of)

[110] The stagehands were all locals.

jokingly told Fritz. They wouldn't do it again, I said. I hope not, Fritz replied, with a hint of uneasiness, because nothing like this had ever happened before.[111]

By no means was that the only time the technicians requested me to act as a mediator between themselves and the artists. One night during the show, there was a violent incident that transpired between Ras and Babu in the catering area of the venue where we were performing.[112] Afterwards, Ras had gone off without telling anyone where, and Babu didn't seem to want to talk about it, so the crew approached me on our bus. They asked me what exactly had gone on between the two men. I felt protective of Ras, and didn't know what, if anything, he would want me to tell them, so I was very vague in my answers. Olaf said he was only asking me so the crew could know if they had to "look out" for the possibility that something bad might happen between the two of them. I told Olaf that if I thought it was going to be an issue in the future, I would make sure to tell them. I said that I knew Ras well, but not Babu. "That's the problem," Fritz interjected, "nobody (from the crew) really knows them." Not satisfied with my response, Gerda called Melaku, and he reassured her that it was no problem, and that Ras would definitely come back tomorrow. I said that I trusted what Melaku said because he knew Ras very well. Gerda believed that Ras would, indeed,

[111] Within a couple of hours of me talking to Zulan and Idogbe about the crew's upset, somebody pooped in the crew bus bathroom while the bus was parked outside of the venue. As anyone who's toured knows, nobody is allowed to poop on the bus. This is an ABSOLUTE NO-NO. It's perhaps the most important bus rule that exists; pee is okay, but absolutely no poop. If someone needs to poop while the bus is moving, then the driver stops at a public establishment and waits for said person. On that day, however, the buses were parked in the venue parking lot, which was fairly inaccessible to the public. The buses also had codes to enter, making it very difficult for someone not on the tour to gain entry. The crew and the bus driver were absolutely irate at what happened, and everyone who lived on that bus was questioned (which, aside from Nelson and Tsetseg, was just myself and the crew). This had never happened before in all the years of the tour, I was emphatically told. I couldn't help but notice the coincidence of the timing, although I never said anything about it. The guilty party was never found.

[112] Babu physically attacked Ras over a woman (who had previously dated Babu, and was now dating Ras), and threatened to kill him. No one witnessed the incident firsthand, but Ras went directly to Werner, and asked him to call the police. Then he came to me, and told me what had happened, before disappearing for the night.

come back the following day, but what concerned her and the rest of the crew the most was the unpredictability of what could happen after that.[113]

Nobody really knew the African artists, Fritz had said to me that night. This element of the unknown caused great nervousness amongst the German crew, who lacked the right amount of cultural where-with-all to accurately predict when Africa's unfamiliar violence might rear its ugly head. A few of the technicians, when pondering whether or not to take Nelson up on an offer of future employment at his circus in Tanzania, made comments to me about how their hesitancy was related to a strong sense of fear of the rumoured dangers of the 'dark continent'. These dangers were also referred to from time to time by the African artists in the show, only they were not discussed in terms of generalized fears – or fear at all, actually - but rather how to grapple with the practical and concrete concerns of navigating the day-to-day in homelands such as South Africa, that were affected by an abundance of violent crime, drug use, and the kinds of structural violence that led to a lack of economic and educational opportunity. Working with Circus of Africa, and performing internationally in general, provided the artists with one effective, albeit temporary, answer to the problematic and dangerous question of how to live well and successfully as an 'African'. But for the German technicians, who never really got to know the African artists all that well, and who (for the most part) had never left the invisible boundaries of their own nation-state, were only left with the scary unanswerable.

[113] What did happen after that was that the crew told me to tell Ras that if Babu did anything like that again, he would be sent back to Tanzania. Nelson, upon hearing about the feud, called the two performers and the band into his office where they discussed things, and "made peace". Not surprisingly, the two artists were not friendly with one another afterwards.

Parties

The divide between the artists and the technicians was profound. It became even more apparent that the two groups very rarely mixed on big social occasions like birthdays:

I descended down the dimly lit corridor, and headed towards room 132 at the bottom of the stairs. I knocked. The door opened. The room was packed, full of people, and swimming in wildness: Ras on the bed with Jina. People taking turns dancing. Drinks being spilled accidently, carelessly. Musical thumping ruckus. Kobla and Amri, stripped down to their underwear, gyrating shamelessly, dicks swinging wildly beneath flimsy undergarments, people snapping close up shots. Naledi's jaw dropping at the sight, leaving the room in shock. Chants of "fuk-a-fuk-a!" Tawa on the bed dancing stripper-like in tight jeans. Ras, lying underneath her, putting a bottle between her legs. The crowd yelling for her to go down. Tawa going down, hips swaying. Ras laughing-screaming, "nooooooo!!!" Asante shaking a bottle of champagne vigorously, spraying its contents all over Kodjo, the bed, the walls, all of us. Cameras being whipped out. Pictures snapping. People drifting in and out. Kodjo slurring a toast to everyone thanking us and apologizing for anything he may have ever done wrong. Bags of miniature lollipops exploding, their contents scattering all around. Abebe drinking beer. All of us piling onto the bed. Fred coming in complaining about the noise, looking surprised as he sees me, saying something about Dietrich, and coming back later to drink a beer.

And that was a typical Circus of Africa party. So on the night of the stage manager, Werner's, birthday, when I was told that after the show there would be a party on the crew bus, suffice it to say, I was expecting something of a blow out. While the

technicians rapidly unloaded the venue, I made my way back ‘home’ to wind down from the day, and was disarmed by the scene of colourful and carefully placed birthday décor that lay before me in the upstairs lounge area. Bright borders of twirling streamers and fat balloons surrounded the neat and tidy bowls of chocolate, candy, and crisps that intermingled with an aesthetically tasteful selection of fine German beer. A fancy personalized card signed by all of the technicians (but not by Nelson, Tsetseg, and myself, who, despite the fact that we also lived on the bus, had not been asked) was the centrepiece of the display. Gerda had apparently made quite the effort to do it up just right.

Eventually, the crew began trickling in, and, excited to participate in the big celebratory event that lay before us, I momentarily peeled myself away from sorting photographs downstairs to join them. However, it was a curious sight that I met with when I reached the top of the stairs; the crew members, who normally spent their nights kicked back in the lounge area, generously drinking beer, wolfing down sandwiches, and chatting away in German, were all seated stiffly in a semi-circle, beers gripped tensely in hand, stewing in awkward silence, and surrounded, in contrast, by the happy multitude of multi-coloured streamers which Gerda had so delicately hung. This scene certainly had nothing in common with the handful of other parties that I had attended on Circus of Africa’s tour, which were all parties thrown by, and for, the artists. And needless to say, I didn’t stay for long.

The distinction between the way that the artists and the technicians socialized drew attention to the chronic problem of ‘difference’ on tour and was apparent enough. However, the gap between the two groups was sometimes, and under certain

circumstances, traversed. When group differences became more about the differences between 'the population on tour' and the 'local lay people', then these transgressions were more apt to occur. Side-by-side with the on-going problems of difference and separation, was the occasional opportunity, often at the hands of outside racism, for a technician to diplomatically mediate between Circus of Africa's artists and the German world outside the confines of the tour. For instance, on the night of the contortionist, Abasi's, birthday, there was a party in the mixed bus. As with most of the parties thrown by the cast, there was a lot of yelling, whooping it up, and rap music. After some time, and because the buses weren't due to depart until early morning,[114] we went out looking for a club where we could go dancing. It was a rare occasion where one of the German technicians, Fritz, came along. Fritz had been to our destination, a large and packed three-story disco, before. When we arrived, the cast members started to enter the club behind Fritz and me, and the doorman, oblivious to the fact that we had all come together, stopped the artists behind us before they had a chance to enter. Almost as if it were routine, Fritz walked up to the doorman and spoke to him in German. After a few anticipatory minutes, we were all ushered into the club. As we wound our way around the drunk and weaving crowd, Fritz explained to me that he had given his passport to the doorman as a guarantee that the African artists would pay before they left the club, and that they would not fight; if he hadn't been there with us as a mediator, the cast of Circus of Africa would not have been let into the club at all, he said. He told me that this was very typical, and that it had happened before and on that occasion he had to give a 500 Euro deposit to guarantee peace on the club's dance floor. I asked why he thought this happened. At first he said it was because the cast didn't speak German. "Neither do I," I said. Then

[114] The distance to the day's venue was extremely short.

he told me it was because they're African. I took in what he had said, and then looked around to see what the others might have thought about it. Despite the apparent nature of the incident, none of the artists seemed to have had any kind of overt reaction (although when I asked him later, Ras confirmed that this kind of thing did happen a lot, and that it was more than a sore subject with some of the artists). Rather, the boys danced all night with strange women, busied themselves getting phone numbers, and spent time making new "friends," as they liked to call them. Finally, around 4:15 in the morning, Fritz told me that it was our duty to "round them up" in order to make the 5 am bus departure. I was surprised at the unnecessarily authoritative role he had allocated to himself (and even more surprised that he had allocated the same role to me!), and jokingly called him "dad." He said that that was exactly how he felt, and considering the distant relationship he had with most all of the cast members, the irony of that statement did not go unchecked. Fritz got more and more frustrated as he unsuccessfully tried to get everyone together. I told him he could leave, and I could "watch them," if it made him feel any better. He decided to stay. As we stood there together, looking on as the artists danced, he turned to me and said, as he already had a few times throughout the night, that he got the "feeling that they need this… like they need to let loose, and let it all out." These uncomfortable words echoed a sentiment he had expressed to me not too long before, that he had the "feeling that they (the Africans) are all hyperactive… running around all day playing and making some noises…. (That) you have the feeling they're happy the whole day… (that) they have fun the whole day… (that) they need something to play with and make noises."

As the above incident shows, Fritz's racially stereotyped assessments of the African artists were often blindly accompanied with growing concern for the problem of

racism in his own country. Another example took place later on, on an 'off day',[115] Fritz and I were discussing the incident in the club, and he told me that violent racism in Germany was a problem "in general." On tour, it was no secret that parts of Germany were known for overt, and frequently violent, expressions of racism against Africans. The artists were warned by the crew in a few cities not even to go out in public alone. Simultaneously, Fritz stated, he thought that African circus worked well in the country because Germans wanted to "see them" (meaning the Africans). Nelson had said something to me when I first arrived on tour that elaborated a bit on this observation: he told me that he believed that African circus had a good market in Germany, but not in a country like Holland for instance, because there were fewer Africans living in Germany than in Holland. Holland was a country whose citizens were exposed to plenty of Africans on a daily basis, and therefore didn't need a formally staged production in order to get a glimpse of 'Africa'. The frightening accuracy of those amateur analyses was also reflected by the local promoter who thought it was "great" that Circus of Africa was "showing" the Germans that Africans from so many different nations could "work together… (and) not just (murder) each other." And the audience was surely pleased insofar as they could observe the harmony in the contained and visible arena of the stage, but when the artists transcended the barrier of the performance venue, the public, like the doorman who required Fritz's passport in order to ease the threat of Africans in the club, wasn't always feeling "the spirit of togetherness."

[115] There were days throughout the tour when we didn't have a show (usually every week on Mondays). These were known as 'off days', and they were spent in hotels rooms provided by Circus of Africa. We would generally arrived at the hotel early in the morning (having driven all night the night before), spend the day, and one night, and the leave early the next morning (the venue was usually less than an hour driving distance from the hotel).

Dark and Light

The need for Germans on Circus of Africa's tour (technicians and audience) to *see* 'Africa' and 'Africans' in a good light was a persistent problem. For instance, one night I was downstairs on the crew bus sorting through photos on my laptop. I had been struggling to find a shot of Mwaka that overcame the impenetrable visual obstacle of a shadow cast over his eyes by his insurmountable hat.[116] Dietrich, who had quietly joined me, stood over my shoulder, looking on as I flipped through the shots of Papa Africa's lead singer. He remarked that African people were very difficult to photograph because their skin was so dark that you needed more light to get a good shot. I told him that I thought the problem was actually Mwaka's fedora, not his skin colour; I had gotten plenty of nice photos of the other performers, I said, who were all, of course, also African. I showed him some examples, but Dietrich continued to insist that Africans needed to be lit from the ground in order to get good photos of them. He suggested that maybe one day we should light the show from below so I could properly "capture" the Africans. I was silent. All photos had their various problems, Dietrich elaborated uncomfortably. Several weeks after this initial analysis, Dietrich drove his point home when he commented to me, again, about how difficult it was to take photos of Africans. As an example, he told me that, once, he had worked with an Arab band (not exactly African, but okay…), and during a photo session, it had literally taken hundreds of photos just to get one decent publicity shot of them. Along the same lines as Dietrich's theory on photography, one afternoon during a busy rehearsal, Nelson had come into the theatre looking for Dawit, who was onstage, and hadn't heard Nelson calling out his name. Watching the scene unfold was Werner, who turned to another member of the crew and said in English, giggling,

[116] The venue stages were always elevated, and I was always shooting Mwaka (and everyone else) from below.

that Dawit was “too black” to be seen. So apparently it wasn’t just for the sake of film that more light was needed to compensate for the disturbing darkness of the artists’ too-black-to-be-seen African faces.

Noises

If the artists were, on occasion, considered by the crew to be “too black” to be *seen*, this was certainly not the case in terms of *hearing* them. I was talking with Fritz about the relationship between the artists and the crew, when the conversation turned to the subject of the night when the technicians were awoken by the two anonymous and tipsy artists who were banging on bus number three at all hours of the night. Fritz, whose anger had clearly been quelled with the passage of time, reminded me that that had never happened before on the bus. Relatedly, on off days, the artists also knew not to knock on his hotel room door for anything unless it was an emergency (i.e., not computer related), he said. On off days, the crew hotel rooms (and mine) were near to each other, but away from those of the artists. The technicians all had ‘do not disturb’ signs hanging from the door knobs, and on the sheet of paper which contained the room numbers and occupants names that would be distributed to the artists on each off day so that they could find each other to hang out, the crew names and numbers were usually marked out (with the exception of Gerda’s, to be used for emergency purposes only). This lesson was learned the hard way, though; one time an artist had done the unthinkable, disturbing him in his room, and Fritz had gotten really angry. Sometimes you just wanted a few moments of quiet, he justified to me, and usually (i.e., on other tours), the catering area was the place you could go to find that. But not on the Circus of Africa tour, he said. Fritz explained that he was sick of hearing all the

mobiles, and the loud music that was constantly generated in the catering area by those "crazy Africans," he said with a mocking laugh.

He certainly wasn't the only technician who felt that way. After the show, one evening before an off day, Olaf was whistling happily outside of our bus. "You're happy," I said to him. He replied that it was because tomorrow was an off day, and, "I don't have to see the freaks tomorrow… no freaks tomorrow. I am happy." For the technicians, who sometimes referred to the artists as "freaks," though never in front of them (e.g., Fritz would say to *me* that he had to do the "sound check for the freak show"), off days could guarantee them with a temporary 'safe' haven from the noisy disturbances of the African 'freaks' they were subjected to in the catering area on a daily basis. It was a rare occasion, however, when the architecture of the catering area itself could provide a similar sense of peace and quiet. And when it did, the crew were sure to take advantage of it.

Food

Like socializing, there was also a tendency for the cast and crew to eat separately. When I asked the technicians why this was, they could never come up with an answer. According to most of the cast, however, it was a deliberate choice for them to keep their distance from the crew. On one occasion, however, I was told differently. It was mid-day, and we were at a venue that happened to have two small rooms for the catering area, instead of one large space, which is what we usually had. Over the course of the day, the Germans (technicians and bus drivers alike) ate in one of the rooms, and the African artists ate in the other.[117] I was struck by the visual image of

[117] I ate in the room with the artists.

these two rooms, equal in size and shape, standing next to one another, one filled with white people, and the other filled with brown people. Certainly no one had been told that the Germans should eat in one room, and the Africans should eat in the other, and yet I couldn't look at the scene without images of U.S. pre-civil rights movement forced segregation running through my mind. I mentioned this to a group of artists whom I was eating my lunch with. Fred, the only one who responded to my observation, jumped on me quickly, and, I might say, quite defensively. No one had told the artists they couldn't eat in the other room; they were always welcome there, and no one had told them otherwise, Fred sensitively proclaimed. He reminded me that the artists and the crew usually ate together. Yes, I thought, they did usually eat in the same room, but I could hardly recollect a time when I saw the crew and the artists eating at the same table, or seated next to each other. Instead of sharing this thought with Fred, however, I dropped the subject matter completely.

It wasn't just physical dining space that separated the artists from the crew at meal times; their food was different as well. The technicians could eat either the German or Tanzanian food,[118] but the artists, on the other hand, were only supposed to eat the African food; they had to get special permission to gain access to German meals on tour. One day I overheard Naledi and Lukas talking in the catering area. He had put a potato on a plate for her, and was telling her that even though her situation was different, that she was "sick,"[119] if he were to serve her his food, then all the performers would start coming to him and saying that they, too, were "sick." He told her he was only supposed to be cooking for a small number of people, and that there simply wouldn't be enough German food to nourish all the hungry bellies of the

[118] An artist told me this, but I never saw actually saw the technicians eat from Mapenzi's 'kitchen'.
[119] Naledi suffered from near-debilitating digestive pain.

African artists. Lukas' tone with Naledi was certainly nice enough, but he wasn't about to bend the rules, even in the face of Naledi's ultra sensitive gastrointestinal reflexes, without Nelson's okay. Several days later, Naledi told me that she had gotten permission to eat Lukas' food. She explained that, for some time, Fred had been encouraging her to talk to Nelson and demand special meals, and the other day Lukas had suggested the same thing. It wasn't like her to do such a thing, Naledi modestly assured me, but her stomach problems had finally gotten the best of her. So now, Fred, Gebre,[120] and herself were the only artists allowed to eat the German food, which, Naledi thought, made it seem like Lukas' food was the only "healthy" food on tour. But it wasn't a healthier menu she exclaimed to me; it was just a "different" menu. Hence, daily scenes in the catering area, as well as punctuating the distance that stood between the artists and the crew, also became an arena for the expression of various differences.

Bad Ghosts

Even when culinary differences and the physical distance between the artists and the crew in the catering area were surpassed, the social gap between the two groups usually remained. One early morning, I was seated next to Maharene in the bright orange catering area, typing up my notes, when one bus driver, Markus, came and sat down on the other side of me. One of the Circus of Africa bus drivers, Markus was known for his racist behaviour by the artists who counted him as their least favourite driver,[121] while he was liked most by the German crew. We made some small talk,

[120] Fred had the same problem as Naledi. Gebre had a more serious health concern; he was diagnosed with a potentially fatal kidney problem that had left him hospitalized for over a month in Austria (he was in the hospital for the first number of weeks that I was on tour). This was not a new problem. Gebre had also spent an extended period of time in a hospital in Běijīng, and, prior to that, in Ethiopia. See chapter seven.

[121] The tour bus drivers rotated between the three buses.

and I told him about an annoying infection that had been developing in my nose. All of a sudden, Markus began talking in a very condescendingly ambiguous way about how Africans ridiculously believed that "bad ghosts" could inhabit a person. To remove them, Markus explained as he mimed the movements of an old man dancing with a pair of imaginary shakers, one must do some superstitious kind of ritual. I said that I didn't think all Africans believed this to be true, but he assured me that most, naively, did. What struck me the most about this scene was not so much the stereotypical and uninformed portrait of 'African' health care that Markus had painted for me, but the fact that Maharene had been sitting next to me the whole time, listening in on our conversation,[122] yet he had acted as if she was completely invisible.

The image the crew sometimes unintentionally portrayed of the African artists, was that of a unified group that was both simultaneously *invisible* (i.e., they needed more light in order to be seen, or their presence during a conversation addressing stereotypical notions of African culture stayed unrecognized by the German speaker) and *hyper-audible* (i.e., "freaks" who inappropriately blasted music in the catering area, or who, on a daily basis, needed "something to play with and (to) make noises"). In the case of the latter, the crew, by implication, often grounded their own understanding of the Africans' foreign need to make some noise, in the trusty, durable, and time-tested old-fashioned archetype that was exemplified in David's story about "bad ghosts." This image of the "crazy African" also figured in the technicians' telling of a few very real, and perplexing, stories about Circus of Africa's artists themselves.

[122] I assumed this because she was the only other person at our table, and she was sitting directly beside us.

Fritz and I were sitting downstairs on the crew bus when he told me about Nthati, the lead singer from last year's tour whose had seen God. Fritz told me that throughout the run, she had spent all of the money she had been earning shopping daily for clothes and shoes. Two weeks before the end of the tour, Nthati had a breakdown. After making around 600 Euros in phone calls to her husband in South Africa, she claimed she was seeing and talking to God, and became physically violent towards Dietrich and the receptionist of the hotel where they had spent the night on an off day. She was put in the hospital overnight, and was released the next day. Because Nelson and Dietrich said she couldn't come back to the show, Nthati got sent back to Africa immediately. I asked Fritz if that was the only time that something like that (i.e., someone 'losing it' on tour) had happened in Circus of Africa. No, Fritz said, it wasn't. On the tour last year, three girls had gotten pregnant. Two were sent home. The third one was Tawa. She opted to stay on the tour and, because she couldn't do that while pregnant, she was going to have an abortion. Since abortions were illegal in Germany, they took her to Holland to obtain one. The day after the abortion was performed, Tawa had an episode; she was screaming and crying on the floor in front of everyone. Jina (who translated to the crew for her)[123] and one of the other performers, Amri, explained that spirits had possessed Tawa. They also told the technicians that possession wasn't uncommon; Amri said that it had also happened to him before too.

Fathers and Children

In contrast to this disruptive notion of the "crazy African," a more palatable version of what an 'African' was existed amongst the crew on tour. A couple of weeks before

[123] At the time, Tawa could only speak Swahili.

the end of the run and feeling exhilarated about his job, Dietrich and I were talking, when he launched into a positive monologue in which he told me that every day on tour was getting better for him, that he was excitedly preparing to go to Tanzania to work for Nelson's new circus in Dar Es Salaam, and just how much he liked the group of artists in the show. I knew what he meant, I agreed; it most certainly was an extraordinary group of people, an inspiring environment, and one of the most thrilling experiences I had had in my life. Dietrich continued on his tirade of joy, saying that there were Muslims and Christians there together, and that everyone got along so well that every night before the show they held hands and prayed together. He wished that the whole world was like that. The artists came from nine different African countries, he said, and yet they all worked together. But wait a minute, I thought. They didn't come from nine different countries. Didn't he know that? Thomas was quoting the show verbatim, and apparently believed in some of the multi-cultural falsities embedded in the performative discourse that Circus of Africa espoused to its European audiences. Then I remembered some weeks before, when Dietrich had spoken to me about the incident in which I had problematically brought Nassir onto the crew bus to look over some photos, and he hadn't even known Nassir's name even though we were already more than two months into the tour, and Nassir was one of just thirty-some cast members – a relatively small group of performers in a touring production. How well could he know the artists if he didn't even know some of their names, and where they had come from, I wondered. But, ironically, just as this question passed through my mind, Dietrich said that the artists were like his "kids," and lifted his arms into a hug that was big enough to encircle the entire globe.

Like Dietrich, Fritz felt (in 'We Are the World' fashion) like he filled the shoes of an absent paternal figure for the 'orphaned' Africans on tour. But, also like Dietrich, Fritz didn't know a handful of the artists' names. One night Nassir and Gebre came to the crew bus to talk with me about problems they were having viewing some video footage I had shot for them during that evening's show. Fritz came upstairs to tell me they were outside waiting for me, but stumbled over his words as he tried to recollect their names, finally settling on letting me know that, "a couple of the guys," were there to see me. Sometime later, near the end of the tour, I was looking for the two contortionists who I was shooting on that particular day for Nelson's Tanzanian documentary, Adli and Darweshi, and asked Fritz if he had seen them. "Who?" he asked, to which I replied, "The two contortion boys who aren't Zawadi and Amri[124] – do you even know their names?" "No," he readily admitted. And we both laughed.

Artists and Technicians

Although he sometimes felt like a father, Fritz was conscious about the distance that existed between the artists and the crew, and was more than willing to discuss it with me than the other technicians. On a warm and overcast afternoon, the two of us stood outside of the day's venue, and debated about whether the separation was more along the lines of that of 'artist' to 'crew', or "Africans' to Germans'. I asked him about how the distance between the two groups in Circus of Africa compared with other productions he had been involved with. Fritz told me that that kind of distance varies from production to production, but it was more pronounced in Circus of Africa than on other tours he had worked on. Somehow I got the sense that he was even surprising

[124] Zawadi, a Kenyan hand balancer, and Amri were more prominent on tour; both professionally and personality-wise. Professionally, they were the other two members that made up the four contortionists. On top of being the lead figure in the group act, Zawadi also had his own solo hand balancing/contortion act. Amri took a secondary role to Zawadi in the group contortion, but was known for being rather loud and socially troublesome.

himself by what he was saying. He told me that one minute, you felt as if you were best friends with the artists, and then the next, you felt like a complete stranger to them. He sited Werner as an example – one minute he was trying to hang out with Naledi and Jina, and the next minute he hated them. I thought of having often seen Werner late at night drinking beer and looking at photos of himself posing with the female artists of last year's Circus of Africa tour, juxtaposed against the long looks he would give me from across the catering area, as I dined with the artists (something that I never saw him do). On some tours, Fritz told me, the crew and the artists had separate catering areas entirely. Which area was better, food included, would depend on the production company. On many tours, he said, you had artists who thought they were divas. We both laughingly agreed that the opposite was true on Circus of Africa; here you had members of the crew who thought they were divas.

The Anthropologist

The groupings that became significant on Circus of Africa's tour weren't just confined to the categories of 'German technicians' and 'African artists'; they encompassed several defining elements that included, but were not limited by, one's nation-state, language, and job in the show. On top of that, they were flexible categories that called for some malleability on the part of the artists. In order to lay a solid foundation from which to explore this concept of group membership (in particular how it related to racism), I want to engage more in depth the nuances of the relationship between Circus of Africa's artists and technicians, with particular reference to how my role as an anthropologist came into play.

One day I was sitting in the dressing room with Naledi, talking about the distance between the artists and the technicians on the tour. This separation had initially really surprised me when I had arrived in Germany, I told her. She said there was, indeed, a big gap between the two groups, but that everyone had gotten used to it by now. There had always been tension, she said. She told me about last year's lead singer, Nthati, who had since been diagnosed with bi-polar disorder, and was currently undergoing treatment in her home country of South Africa while Naledi had stepped in to take her place in the show. Nthati hated Circus of Africa, Naledi said, and would tell the technicians straight to their faces: "You're not better than me just because you're white… I can have you fired." Naledi said she missed Nthati's presence on the tour. Then she told me that Germans liked "tripping" (i.e., being in power), but if you started to communicate directly with them, got up in their faces, and told them like it was, like Nthati did, they would become afraid of you. She said that she couldn't help but notice that, after the weeks I had been on tour, I wasn't close with the crew. She wanted to know why; she said that it was obvious why the artists weren't close with the crew - because the artists were "Africans" – but I was "white." Was it because I was American, and not German, Naledi wondered? I told her that I wasn't sure why, but I certainly felt a lot closer to the artists than the crew (even though I lived on the crew bus). Maybe the German technicians didn't know what to make of me, a white person who ate, talked, and hung out with the Africans on tour by choice (and with an ease that seemed to be inaccessible to them). I speculated that this could also imply that I had chosen the artists' company over theirs. The Africans didn't really invite the technicians to go out, or hang out with them, either, Naledi said, because they just didn't like their company. There were only one or two technicians Naledi could joke or laugh with. Kodjo and Jina were the only artists who could completely "cross

over," as she put it, to befriend the crew. But she didn't understand how they did it. All social life aside, Naledi stated hopefully, the most important thing was that the two groups could work together in peace. Most of the time they could - but not always.

My ability to connect with the artists was not a constant guarantee of my immersion in their group, however. There were many moments that our differences also became very apparent. For example, I was walking down a German street one afternoon with some of the artists looking for a taxi that could take the lot of us back to the venue in time for them to practise. We couldn't find one that was large enough for the whole group to pile in, so I suggested that I could go back separately and meet them all back at the theatre. In his typical straightforward manner, the show's Tanzanian costumer, Asante, turned to me and said that sometimes he didn't like me – wait, correction, no - he didn't like my "*behaviours,"* because: "When you're with Africans, you must *be* African." What does that mean, I asked him. It means that you should be comfortable, Asante said; if you want to take something, take it; if you want to sit somewhere, sit there.

A Continent on Tour

Despite Asante's commentary on the importance of 'being African', what the crew saw as one group of unified African artists was obviously a more complex, fluctuating, social universe, full of changing alliances and divisions within and between a handful of sub-groups defined by nation-state, language, and job in the show. But, interestingly, even though the casual mentioning of, and joking about, an artist's nationality was commonplace on tour, only a couple of the artists *directly*

stated to me that nationality was an influential factor in the formation of social groups on Circus of Africa. When they did, it was often along negative lines.[125] For example, early on Ras told me that the Tanzanians generally didn't like the Ethiopians on tour because Nelson was always saying, "look at the Ethiopians" (in reference to their solid work ethic and high skill level).[126] On a later occasion, after having made a similar type of statement, he told me that he shouldn't talk this way to me because he didn't want me to get the wrong impression – in other words, either a negative, or an inaccurate impression – about how the groups of artists on tour viewed one other.

Similarly, the women on tour, who were usually assigned to two separate, smaller dressing room areas they had to share in each venue,[127] consistently divided themselves between the two spaces in the exact same way: Hiwot, Maharene, Naledi, Jendaya, and Reta (the Ethiopians, South Africans, and Zimbabweans) in one dressing room; and Jina, Mapenzi, Chantal, and Tawa (the Tanzanians and Ivory Coast) in the other. There was a little bit of competition between the two groups over the spaces. Jina, an early riser, generally made her way into the venue before any other of the women. She would naturally scope out the better changing room, and lay claim to it. Maharene, who had developed some sort of mysterious beef with the Tanzanians, started to try to get up earlier than Jina in order to claim the better dressing room in retaliation. After she began this practice, Maharene would proudly ask me from time to time if I thought the dressing room she picked was a good one. The former group, whose dressing room I almost always shared, upon my asking, told me that the two groups just naturally evolved, and that they had no idea why the "Tanzanians" and the

[125] At least one of my key interlocutors was concerned about me writing anything negative regarding tension between different African groups on tour. After much consideration, I felt it was too important to leave it out.
[126] I never heard Nelson say such a thing.
[127] Rather than having just one large one.

"Ivory Coast" wanted to be separate from them. Near the end of the tour, I wound up in the other dressing room one day. Jina was surprised to see me there, and told me she had been wondering why I always chose to stay with the other group of women. I said it was by chance, and that I just went into the first women's dressing room that I saw in the venue each day, and that it was just usually, randomly, the one that had been claimed by the other group. I asked her why the two groups had separated out in the way they did, and Jina said, with a hint of uncharacteristic vulnerability evident in her tone, that she didn't have any idea why the other group wanted to be on their own and, importantly, away from the Tanzanians. Interestingly, Jina's answer, like that of the Ethiopian/South African/Zimbabwean ladies, assumed the decision behind the separation was made at the hands of the other group, and was essentially a nationality-based group aversion (in this case, against the Tanzanians).

At times, however, in Circus of Africa, explicit discussion of nationality took on a very light hearted tone. For instance, once, during a conversation with Jina, she laughingly told me that all of the performers from the Ivory Coast were "crazy." Jina then elaborated a bit, adding that Idogbe was "better" (i.e., more calm) than he had been on the previous year's tour, and laughed off romantic rumours that Mapenzi and Idogbe, Kobla and Tawa, and herself and Oumar (all Tanzanian women and Ivory Coast men) were newfound couples.[128] For all her nationalistically oriented teasing, however, before our conversation was finished, Jina made sure I knew that she certainly didn't mind being associated with the guys from the Ivory Coast.

[128] It was common knowledge that some of the artists from Tanzania and the Ivory Coast had romantic feelings for each other, but were unable to act on them for various personal reasons.

To take this discussion about the relationship between nationality, group membership, and light-heartedness in Circus of Africa one step further, it will be necessary to provide a couple of more typical, and, accordingly, more pertinent, examples of it amongst the cast. Pierre, a drummer from the Ivory Coast, felt that too much joking between himself and the Ethiopians had gotten him into trouble. This became clear during one off day when Dawit, Abe, Kobla, Chantal, Pierre[129] and myself were all drinking beer, eating kebab, and watching wrestling from Dawit's bed, and someone started making fun of Pierre. Pierre, exhausted from being the constant butt of everyone's jokes, complained that the Ethiopians treated his fellow musicians from the Ivory Coast with respect because they hadn't joked too much with them in the past. He, on the other hand, had laughed with the Ethiopians all the time, and, as a result, often found himself at the mercy of the swift and stinging humorous whip of the Ethiopians. And with that, a red wine-inspired Pierre announced that he was finally finished joking with people. Of course that wasn't the case. Many a-time after that, I would hear Pierre making fun of, and being made fun of, by the Ethiopians (oftentimes in the name of his, or their, nationality). For example, one time I was sitting with him and Ras downstairs on the boys' bus, when Nassir came over and sat down with us. Pierre immediately rolled his eyes, and said that there were too many Ethiopians there; only one Ethiopian at a time was allowed at the table, he announced with an angry (not to mention very funny) face. This type of nationality-targeted humorous banter was never too far away from a conversation between the artists of Circus of Africa because, although there was a distinct tendency for the performers to congregate over meals with other artists from their own places of origin, mixing

[129] Kobla and Chantal were both dancers from the Ivory Coast.

between cast members from various countries tended to prevail in the social arena on tour.

The African melting pot of Circus of Africa was an enjoyable refuge for many of the artists. Zulan, who had previously worked in 'Oh, Africa!' told me that, although 'Oh, Africa!' was a much larger scale show than Circus of Africa, he still preferred the social environment here because it was more like a "family." Along the same lines, I was once sitting with Asante in his sewing room, when he said that it wasn't just the money that he liked about working on the tour; it was also the people. In Circus of Africa, Asante said, there were no Ethiopians, no Tanzanians, and no Zimbabweans; here they all ate together and lived together in the same way, and as one group. So despite the fact that there was part of Circus of Africa where prop boxes and laundry lists were partially marked by the artists' countries of origin rather than their given names, and tour jokes about nationality abounded, many of the artists on tour still felt that the harmony amongst them as a larger 'African' group trumped the smaller nationality-based loyalties they found themselves navigating throughout the show. And, explicitly at least, the sense of being 'African' took on a great importance.

Language

When it came to dealing with overt racism, the shared identity of being African was especially important. One day I was sitting in the Circus of Africa catering area in the early afternoon with Abebe, talking about his new 'European' life over a late breakfast. I asked him what the most striking things were that differentiated Europe, Ethiopia, and China from one another.[130] He stated (in order): buildings, people,

[130] They were the only countries outside of Ethiopia that Abebe had been to.

culture, place, behaviour, and the language (which he didn't "have" when he first came to Germany).[131] Then Abebe pointed out something else: in Germany "some people they like blacks, some people, they don't like (blacks)." I asked him how the experiences he had had with racism in Germany compared with those in China, and he replied that it wasn't as bad here in Germany, and that "China… (had the) most (racism)." How could he tell when someone in Germany didn't like black people, I asked. Abebe said it was the "face" that indicated it, and then went on to state that "sometimes the problem (was actually the) language." He told me a story about a time when he got lost in a German city with some of Circus of Africa's artists. The group had to ask directions from a man on the street, and Abebe thought that the man, who responded to their English inquiries with German, was actually able to speak English, but pretended he couldn't because they were "black," and he didn't want to help them. I had witnessed a similar event. When I first arrived on the tour, I went out to buy a SIM card with three of the artists from Circus of Africa, and the man at the shop kept replying in German to the English-speaking Ras, even though it was perfectly clear that he understood every word. Eventually he switched over to English. Of course, it is impossible to say whether this was related to the fact that they were African, or whether it was because they didn't speak German. However, my German skills hardly transcended the most rudimentary level, and whenever I went out in public alone and wound up using English, I was never treated like that.

Despite the occasional 'harmless' racist snub from a member of the German public, Abebe was pleased to be able to take advantage of the professional opportunities that Europe had to offer, especially in an environment like Circus of Africa's, which

[131] Abebe said he had learned some German, but not much. Aside from the four or five phrases that were spoken daily by all of the artists on Circus of Africa's tour, I never heard him use the language out in public.

offered the cultural cushion of a social setting that, when viewed in comparison with the average German metropolis, was more than a little closer to home for him. Abe pointed out that he was content working "with friends… African people," and told me that he liked Circus of Africa better than the other circus the Habesha Jugglers had worked with in Belgium because it had "all African people, (and) more friendship." Abebe was not able to develop strong relationships with the artists in the Belgium-based show the Habesha Jugglers had worked for in between Circus of Africa tours, because of the problem of language. However, although Circus of Africa provided him with a more comfortable 'African-esque' social atmosphere, Abebe found that he still spent the majority of his time with the other Ethiopians in the tour. When I asked him why this was, he told me that, like in Belgium, it was because of the "language problem"; although Abe spoke passable English, it was nonetheless easier for him to talk intimately about his life in his native language, Amharic.

Language has the power to unify a group in many different ways. While I was on tour with Circus of Africa, I couldn't help but think back to some moments in China when, for instance, the Sudanese kids talked amongst themselves in Arabic, often when their Chinese teachers were bothering them a lot during training. These moments highlighted the way that, amongst my interlocutors in a transnational context, language became a powerful tool to reinforce interpersonal and cultural connections, and enable a speaker to defend him/herself against the culturally dominant 'Other' in the situation by means of linguistic exclusion. I thought back to these moments in China because they also happened when I was with the Habesha Jugglers and other African circus performers in Europe. For example, one day Dietrich asked me to take some photos of the contortion boys for a large plaque in Paris. He was extremely

stressed about the whole thing, and when we met at the agreed upon time to shoot them, Nelson happened to be rehearsing the bounce juggling act on the stage. I stood to the side, watching, and waiting for him to finish. He wanted to change the music, some of the timing, and a couple of moves in the act. I was really surprised to see how Nelson, usually such a calm and quiet man, was so unapologetically rigorous with Nassir and Dawit. Dawit kept making mistakes under the pressure, and Nelson said to him a number of times: "We can't time the music right if you're making too many mistakes… what's wrong with you, Dawit: you tired?" Throughout the rehearsal, Dawit, who was a fairly capable English speaker, never addressed Nelson directly, even to answer his questions. Instead, when he seemed to be the most frustrated, he turned to Nassir and spoke with him in Tigrinya. Nelson, after a little while, decided it was best to give them a short break, and we were finally able to get the photo shoot underway. Although Dawit could have spoken to Nelson in decent English, he chose to speak to Nassir in Tigrinya instead. Along the same lines, although the Sudanese kids could have spoken to their Chinese teachers (and uninvited Chinese spectators) in fluent Mandarin, but at significant times during training, they chose to speak to them in Arabic instead. Use of language became an exercise of power in these kinds of situations.

Distances

One evening, as our bus travelled hard and fast into the dark expanse that lay before us, over hundreds of kilometres of smooth grey tarmac terrain on its nightly journey, one of the technicians told me that he really wanted to go to Tanzania to work on Nelson's upcoming show, but was "afraid." Then he asked, "is Tanzania *really* Africa?" I didn't know what to say. The seeming simplicity of this innocently spoken,

but unanswerable question, contained all the perturbing questions of 'difference' that were evidenced in the vast, but largely ignored, division between Circus of Africa's German crew and its African artists. As I reflected upon it later, I wondered if it really wasn't the 'not knowing' that was the problem after all; not the 'not knowing' of 'Africa', but the 'not knowing' of one another. Wasn't it this kind of 'not knowing' that had the power to generate gaps so gigantic that we were forced to fill them in with our own 'cultural' assumptions and judgments and fears? Despite the fact that continental distances had collapsed on Circus of Africa's buses, the space between the artists and the crew still somewhat remained. And that was dangerous indeed.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have begun to describe the offstage tour life of Circus of Africa, and have drawn connections to some similarities in the obstacles of racial stereotyping that the Habesha Jugglers had to deal with in China and in Europe. Just as they were known as "*Fēizhōu rén*" ("Africans") or "*Fēizhōu*" ("Africa") in Huáxīng, they were also known as "Africans" in Europe's Circus of Africa. The title of "African" trumped both their roles as circus performers training *zájì* in China, and the slightly loftier positions they earned on the tour in Germany: those of Nelson's "artists." Much as Ras and the Kenyans thought that people in China wanted to watch "black people" on stage because they *were* black, and that the first thing that they wanted to see when they saw Africans perform was 'Africa', Fritz agreed that people in Germany also wanted to "see them" (the "Africans"). Nelson believed that a show that displayed 'Africa' and 'Africans' would only work in certain places like Germany, however; places that had yet to experience the influx of migrants that, say, Holland had. Nelson believed that 'African' circus wouldn't work in Holland, and he wasn't surprised

when ‘Oh, Africa!’s’ attempt at the market in London was eventually a financial flop. But seeing Africans perform onstage was different than seeing Africans out and about on off days, and seeing Africans dancing with the locals in clubs, and seeing Africans inside the crew bus when they had *their* bus and the technicians had *theirs*. Anxiety about when and where “African” bodies should be seen and heard, and how they should be relating to the material world around them, was a constant topic of chatter amongst the German crew, who did their best, not unlike Huáxīng’s school administrators and staff, to keep a safe and healthy distance between themselves and the artists.

Separate living accommodations/buses, food, and spaces in Circus of Africa were reminiscent of China. The tour’s physical and physiological distancing of the artists from the crew may have been a typical practice of travelling entertainment productions, but it was reframed in the racially-oppositional relationship between the “Germans” and the “Africans.” Instead of resembling a neutral practice, it unfolded as a way to deal with “crazy Africans” who needed to let loose, “make some noises,” and to play with something to satisfy their “freak(ish)” tendencies. Stories of “bad ghosts” and “possession” circulated amongst the crew and the artists in different ways, and talk of three female performers who fell pregnant on last year’s tour, one afflicted with possession, was still going around. The performers whose bodily non-compliance with the corporeal regulations of the tour were faced with the reality that, unless they were of “value” to the production, they would be promptly shipped back to Africa. Similar was the tale of Nthati who lost her mind and, unruly and out of line, got sent back home. Along the same lines of bodies that would not fully submit, there were “sick” performers on tour who were able to manage to get by. Some of them,

including Gebre, got access to Lukas' scarce German cuisine, which was considered as the "healthy" option compared with Mapenzi's African food.

The technicians' need to maintain distance between themselves and the African artists was even more apparent when I spent my days with the artists and my nights with the crew. Due to my somewhat liminal positioning as an anthropologist, the gap between the two groups was bridged in highly charged moments when the artists began to venture near, and into, the space of the crew's bus, transgressing an "unspoken rule" of 'no entry' that seemed only to apply to them. Naledi's curiosity about why I wasn't close to the crew – after all, I was "white" – went hand-in-hand with her common sense understanding of the reason that the German technicians weren't close to the artists: because they were "African." The distances between the two groups exacerbated racist discourses, as the technicians who didn't "really know" the artists speculated as to why the "confused… Africans" couldn't manage foreign objects, or technology, and discussions reached the point of wondering why any of the Africans did what they did at all. The most prominent discursive segregator, Olaf, was nicknamed the "son of Hitler" as he aimed to keep the "poor" artists away from the crew's valuables. Too loud, and "too black" to be seen, the artists were also considered by some of the German crew as "kids" that needed a "dad" to "look out" for them – on the tour, and out in public. An actual guarantee in the form of a passport handed over by a paternal German technician at a club was the only way to gain permission for the unpredictable bodies of "dangerous" Africans to be allowed on the dance floor of a local disco. Dietrich praised the unity of the multicultural "kids" he had been adoptive-fathering, but wasn't aware of some of their names, or the accuracy of their places of origins as he espoused the "feeling of togetherness" that Circus of

Africa was making itself known for propagating. Just as in China, playful and competitive discourses of nationality circulated amongst the African artists, but never quite reached the ears of the crew, who in discussion always considered the group as one unified force of "Africans," much as the Huáxīng School had only known them as "*Fēizhōu.*"

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Work

Introduction: "A Good Life"

As I have described in chapter six, in the Circus of Africa there was both the larger sense of communal spirit that was generated in the name of being 'African', and a smaller sense of humorous duty that was exacerbated by the various ethnic allegiances on tour. Within the international circus economy, however, the groups that took real precedence were the troupes themselves. The troupes were the groups that required the most commitment from their members, and at the same time were the groups in which those individual members (and the groups themselves) had the most at stake in in the end. The troupes were the groups in which the artists worked, day in and day out, performing their acts on stage, which is where group member allegiance counted the most. And, importantly, the troupes were the groups that *really* mattered when it came down to the pragmatics of building a better life for oneself and one's family. In this chapter I will continue my ethnographic exploration of 'back stage' life on Circus of Africa's tour, but this time in relation to the importance of 'work' of the troupe and its members to the process of building better lives for my interlocutors back home.

The unified force of a troupe, along with hard work from one's sweat in order to make good money was seen as the best way to secure freedom and a good future in the face of chronic risk and oppression. Although making it to the U.S. to perform was

initially the ultimate goal for the African circus performers I knew who had trained in China, and performing in Europe was a big step in that direction, once they were abroad and saw the hard fact of racism, their desires frequently shifted. Working in an international circus became a means to an end rather than an end in itself, and involved total corporeal commitment. For an African circus performer faced with the realities of European life, the best way that many envisioned their futures was to make better lives for themselves and for their families by working in a circus like Circus of Africa for several years. Perhaps then they could become a circus agent like Nelson, and then eventually go back home to live in Africa. Many saw this as a way that they could do what they loved and simultaneously earn enough money from working hard by performing physical artistic labour. This, they believed, would pave the road to geographic and economic freedom, which was a helpful resource to draw on when providing well for one's family. In a few years, this road to freedom would hopefully lead them, once again, back home. Only this time they would be returning on their own terms and of their own volition, able to live out a good life at last. And that would be the ultimate dream.

The Troupe

After Circus of Africa's 2007 tour had ended, the Habesha Jugglers were in a bind; they needed both visa extensions and performance work, while biding their time waiting for Circus of Africa's next tour to begin. In order to remedy the situation, Nelson called on his fellow Zimbabwean and friend David to lend a hand. David was a colleague of Nelson's, and he was also the promoter of 'Afrikan Fire', a small 'African' themed circus that was based out of Belgium. David agreed to help the Habesha Jugglers stay in Europe in between Circus of Africa tours, and the group

came to work for him in Belgium. According to Ras, Nelson gave David a lot of money (3,000-5,000 Euro) to take care of the Habesha Jugglers' visas and accommodation while they were there (although Ras also told me that they wound up staying in a caravan most of the time). The Habesha Jugglers were supposed to make 11,000 Euro over the course of their stay with David, but in the end, his Belgium circus only paid them between 5,000 and 6,000 for their performances. This was due to a visa problem they encountered, Ras ambiguously explained.

One day well into our tour, Ras was in the theatre and was clearly unhappy, so I brought him a chocolate drink from the catering area as a cheap, but yummy consolation, as I sat down with him for a chat. He explained that David had come to see the show the night before, and had let it be known that he wanted a ten percent cut from all of the Habesha Jugglers' Circus of Africa shows. None of the Habesha Jugglers thought that was fair because they were "Nelson's" now, he said, meaning that the Habesha Jugglers had a long-term contract with Nelson in which he was entitled to twenty percent of their earnings as their agent. They shouldn't have to pay anything, Ras exclaimed, but because he had helped with (somewhat successfully) extending their visas, David thought he was able to justify his request with legitimate force. Ras looked to Nelson for guidance on the situation, but Nelson took a backseat, explaining that the Habesha Jugglers must make the decision of whether or not to give David the money on their own. According to Ras, David "like(d) money too much," which is why the group didn't want to work with him. "We are not artists for David; we are artists for Nelson," he said. All of a sudden, Ras switched the subject, and told me that he speculated the Habesha Jugglers wouldn't be together next year. It was different now, here in Europe, Ras said. First of all, the Habesha Jugglers no longer

counted Maharene as part of their group, and they were no longer doing their doubles tissu act from Huáxīng because Maharene had fallen from the tissu during the final show of last year's tour and injured her shoulder. When he talked about this, Ras was not so discreet in telling me that Circus of Africa and Nelson took care of its artists more than most other circuses did, and that more than usual, if an artist needed something, then they would do it. He said that it wasn't good for stupid people like Maharene, who had been taking advantage of that and sitting out of a lot of shows due to her shoulder injury. Ras had already told her that if she didn't juggle, she would no longer be part of their troupe. He told her that the floors in the theatres were very hard, and he had to ice his ankles before tumbling every single night, that he bled when Nassir stood on his shoulders during club juggling,[132] and that he, himself, suffered; but that he still did it. Ras told me that even Nelson said that he wanted to send her back to Ethiopia, but he was afraid to lose Shomari, Maharene's boyfriend, a Tanzanian hand-to-hand performer and one of the stars of Circus of Africa. Then Ras explained that after the first tour with Circus of Africa had ended, everything became difficult for the Habesha Jugglers. Now, Ras concluded, they were all looking towards their own individual futures, and towards what they could get out of life. Ras feared this would wind up taking them in very different directions.

Towards the end of the tour, late at night outside a venue, Ras elaborated even further about what he had just started to touch on, on that earlier day. He told me that their group was no longer their group. Now they only practiced for a short time every day, much unlike before. When he was on stage with them, Ras felt so alienated from the other five members of the troupe that sometimes, as he put it, he didn't even know

[132] Nassir had temporarily taken Gebre's place in the act when he was ill in the hospital.

that they were from the same country. Ras was thinking he wanted to leave the Habesha Jugglers for good (on the last tour, he had told them exactly that), and told me that this was a bad time for him in his life in general.[133] The group's club juggling act was "old," and if Nelson didn't want it anymore, they thought there could be a problem for the group to make it back to Germany (in terms of gaining access to future visas), assuming they would decide to take Nelson up on his employment offer in the Tanzanian circus. For Nassir and Dawit, Ras said, it would be no problem to go to Tanzania, and then get visas to come back to Europe because their act was original enough. But the Habesha Jugglers, who had been performing the same club juggling act for a while, were going in all different directions. Hiwot and Gebre had started working on a doubles bounce juggling act; Hiwot also had her foot juggling act; and Abebe had his jar juggling act. But Ras had no solo act of his own to fall back on should the group crumble. Despite his reluctance to do the doubles tissu act with Maharene again, I said that if Ras felt inspired to, he could surely make another act of his own in Tanzania. He didn't want to, he told me, because he was so tired. With a sense of defeat emanating from his voice that was simply heart-breaking, Ras confessed that he didn't trust anyone anymore. It was not like it was in China, Ras lamented. How could it be, I asked; maybe you guys needed each other more, or at least in a different way, in that situation. He replied, vaguely, that people needed him for things, and when they got what they needed from him, they left him. And in terms of the group's prospective future, he told me that when their group expressed serious concern over being able to gain access to German visas in the future if they agreed to leave Europe and go to Tanzania to work in Nelson's circus, Nelson had told them that it would be no problem for them to come back from Tanzania to Germany to

[133] Ras was going through a personal crisis, and as a result was exploring other options in terms of remaining in Europe while breaking away from performing in circus for good.

perform. Ras, however, had learned the hard way that people in the circus business were always saying one thing, and then, promises inevitably breaking, everything would completely change at the last minute.

The Sick Body

Throughout the tour, Ras increasingly expressed frustration and exhaustion to me about his life on tour. He had been seeking out various other ways to stay in Europe besides performing; ways that would allow him a more permanent existence abroad. He had a long-term German girlfriend who, he implied to me, was in his life more for the options (in terms of a visa) she could provide. He also told me he had started paying some Ethiopian contacts to find him a German wife. But Ras wasn't the only member of the Habesha Jugglers who had considered such alternatives.

When I first got to Circus of Africa, Gebre wasn't there. He was in a hospital near Austria, where he had been staying for well over a month, suffering from a serious ailment that compromised his kidneys' ability to function properly. Gebre had suffered a similar flare up while he was in China before I met him. When he returned to the Huáxīng school from a lengthy stay in a Běijīng hospital, Ras had told me the school wanted him to lay off of acrobatics, instead having him concentrate on performing magic, which then became his major. At the time that Gebre had originally been selected to go to China on the exchange, he had already fallen ill. Nonetheless, he had to submit to a series of health tests, which he was required to pass in order to get the go ahead from the school. One of them was a urine test. Gebre did, indeed, pass it, but only because he used somebody else's urine.

Shortly after I joined the Circus of Africa tour, one night on the crew bus Gerda told me that Gebre, who was still in the Austrian hospital, should be back in one or two weeks. But, she said, his situation looked quite dire. The German doctor hadn't said exactly when, but at some point – whether it was in one, two, five, or more years – he would need to go on dialysis for the rest of his life. Now they had him on medication, which they were constantly trying to adjust to find just the right level (i.e. one day he might take one pill, and the next day he might take two). Apparently the doctor said that when he got back, he would be able to do everything that he used to do in the show, and that none of it would pose a real danger to him.[134] However, Gerda said, once the tour ended and he went back to Ethiopia, he wouldn't be able to get the treatment he needed. She mentioned to me that when Ethiopian people needed serious medical treatment, those that could afford it went to countries like South Africa, China, or the United States, to get it.[135] If Gebre were to go back to Ethiopia, she solemnly continued, he would eventually die.[136] Jürgen and Ilsa, one of Circus of Africa's administrative employees who was not on tour with us, were trying to find something for him at the moment, another way, but it was proving to be difficult. For Gebre to perform for some months in Germany was okay, and it was relatively easy to get visas for four or six months, but arranging something more permanent was a harder task. The real solution, Gerda finally said, was for him to marry a German woman. Ras later told me that they were looking for one for him. He added that Hiwot, Gebre's girlfriend and fellow Habesha Juggler, understood the high stakes of the situation at hand, and therefore the necessity of taking such drastic action.

[134] Gebre, who was an incredibly talented tumbler, did not have to do any high level acrobatics in the show.
[135] I have no idea how accurate this was.
[136] Again, I have no idea how accurate of a statement this was.

Whether it had to do with the unknown future trajectory of an illness, or the instability of securing another circus contract that could lock down a visa, consistently throughout my fieldwork I found that the short-term future thrust upon circus performers as they pursued their circus careers, was, geographically and economically speaking, uncertain at best. Even when contracts had been signed, sealed, and delivered, the precarious and complex foundation that those agreements were riding on only guaranteed that there was just no guarantee of what the future would hold for the performers. The resulting paradox meant that my interlocutors had to abandon themselves to an unstable foreseeable future in order to secure a better, and a much more grounded, life in the long run. And as Ras had informed me, the shaky ground of proprietors, promoters, producers, and managers the Habesha Jugglers were navigating required, first and foremost, that the group itself to be on the same page before they could plant a foot that was firmly pointed in the right direction.

Dreams

Faced with the discomforting reality of unsure futures, the Habesha Jugglers and other African circus performers, sometimes re-focused on aspiring toward living out the dreams they had previously opened up to me about in China as well as on tour. For example, one night I was on the mixed bus, talking with Melaku about life. We were sitting in the front, where the driver usually sat (the bus was parked), listening to the hip hop that was thumping out of Melaku's mobile, when I asked him what the best thing in his life was right at this moment. Melaku told me that being in Circus of Africa was the best thing because it used to be his "wish" (to perform abroad with a good circus), and now it had become his reality. He said he needed to always think ahead to what his next wish would be, but for now, he was really enjoying the

international circus life. Overall, he wanted to taste "success." That was his biggest dream. He also wanted to be famous. Melaku compared himself to a cat that wanted to catch a rat, but was trying to chase five rats at the same time, and was afraid he would not catch any of them. There were a lot of routes to success and fame, he said, but a person needed to go after just one rat (not five) in order to be sure to catch it.

Like Melaku, at the time of my research, Abebe was happy living out his dreams, even though they had changed after he arrived in Germany in 2007. Importantly though, for him, the positive aspects of being in Europe centred on his ability to work: to perform, the money he was able to earn from doing it, and a job that he could carry out, "with friends… African people," in a "group," that could, "do everything like white people." "Especially by my work I am happy," Abebe said to me, "but I need to stay in my country…. (First) I (will) make good money, and then I (will) have my life in my country." Coming to Europe to perform was always part of a big life dream for Abe; he had seen "big things before," in the Ethiopian media about life in Europe and the U.S., but since he had arrived in Germany, his perspective on the 'Western' lifestyle had changed. Now, Abebe said, he knew German people, tradition, and behaviour: "(now) I see everything. My mind has changed. (It's) not like before…. Now I know Europe(an) life…. Before I didn't know (it)… (but now I do, and it is) nothing for me now. I like (it) here (in Germany), but mostly I need to live (in) my country." Ultimately, like most of the performers in Circus of Africa, Abebe wanted to return to Ethiopia to live out his life, but he had to work hard and earn money first. And he had to do that in Europe or the United States.

Naledi felt similarly. "I can really *use* the life here. I like it. I like it." she said to me one morning as we talked over coffee in the German catering area. Naledi told me that although South Africa was definitely "home" she nevertheless "love[d] the international life." Ideally, she said, she'd like to stay away from South Africa for the next three or four years. Importantly for Naledi, and for a number of my interlocuters, crime was a much smaller problem in Europe than it was in South Africa (or the other African countries they were from). She also knew how difficult it was to get a job there, especially in the arts, so in the meantime while she had the opportunity abroad, she must be patient, and "equip myself so much" that she wouldn't have a problem competing in the job market when she eventually did go back home.

Across the board, the artists of Circus of Africa told me that Europe was good for work, but that their respective home countries in Africa were where they wanted to settle down after they had amassed whatever fortunes they could garner from performing abroad. Eventually Naledi wanted to become a manager at a big broadcasting network in South Africa, own her own production company, or work for CNN. She certainly knew that she wouldn't perform for the rest of her life. In the long run, she planned on working on her BA in communications science to lay the foundations for her journalistic pursuits. Some, like Naledi, had laid out very concrete plans for just how they planned on getting there in the future. Amri was one of them. He told me on his bus one evening[137] that the only way he could ever have "a good life" in Africa was if he had the appropriate sums of money to make it happen.[138] I

[137] I had been following him around, and filming him that day for Nelson's documentary.
[138] In Tanzania, Amri told me that he could build a house for around 1,000 Euro, so relatively speaking, by European standards, not so much money was needed to do such a thing. That didn't account for the fact that many performers had conflicting notions about work abroad as requiring a very specific, longer period of time to amass the money or other capital required to get what they needed down the line (i.e. Naledi), and associating it with a somewhat vague and indefinite venture.

asked Amri what was "a good life" was. To be able to have more than if he just lived from hand to mouth, day to day, he said. Importantly, to amass those relatively large sums, it had to be done abroad.

Like the rest of the cast, Dawit was also overtly happy to be in the show, and excitedly expressed this to me, brimming over with enthusiasm. He cited two main reasons for his happiness: first, in Circus of Africa, he could "improve (his) talents… if you want to improve your talents, you have to look at greater things… there (in Ethiopia), I cannot do that. Here I can." Second, he made good money in the show. Dawit's feelings about being in Europe in general, however, were a tad bit more vague, as evidenced by this brief snippet of exchange between the two of us.

> Me: Do you like to be in Europe?
>
> Dawit: For what reason?
>
> Me: I don't know.
>
> Dawit: For living? (pause) Only for job(s). For business I love Europe.

I asked him if it was difficult living this kind of life in Europe. He said that practically it was not difficult, but that it was "difficult in mind if you don't have good business." He told me that it was getting more and more frequent for Ethiopian circus performers to "run" when they had made it abroad, and he thought that 90 percent of the people who did, were actually economic refugees.[139]

[139] Economic refugees or not, what all of the Ethiopian circus performers who I talked with did in performance was a life passion for them, making them distinct from both an easy analysis, as well as the mainstream anthropological category of the migrant (or serial migrant) worker.

Asante was aware that many Africans, including the circus performers who ran, felt the way that Dawit, Naledi, Abe, and Melaku did. One day, as he was calmly sewing costumes, he explained to me (in a kind of indirect commentary on what Amri and other artists had said about abroad being a sort of work-only destination) that most Africans had the unfortunate idea that they had to leave Africa in order to survive. Although Asante made sure that I knew that he thought it was sad that so many Africans felt this way about their homeland, he also didn't try to convince me that they were wrong about the whole need to go abroad for the survival part of it. Given what I had heard from the rest of the performers in the show, including the Habesha Jugglers, Asante was right. Even Nelson, a man who wanted to supply his African employees with, as he said, a "good enough wage for Africa," had made Cologne, Germany, his main place of residence. Nelson's family, originally from Zimbabwe, had also left their birthplace a long time before; now they could be found scattered in wealthy countries across the globe, from Australia to the United States to various European countries, profiting from the breadth of relative economic opportunities that Zimbabwe had lacked. In a way, though, Nelson's attempt to create a successful circus in Tanzania was, in one sense, a potential remedy for the 'problem' of Africa; it was a way to show Africans, both as circus artists and as the public alike, that they could 'make it' in Africa, after all. At least that was the plan.

Rare Birds

Nelson and I were riding back from the Hamburg airport in his small, spotless, black Mercedes, with Godfrey, a big-time African promoter[140] who had expressed interest

[140] He was the owner of a massive radio station, and three other radio networks in Tanzania, Godfrey was also in the process of opening a T.V. station there. He had brought such big-name acts Beyoncé,

in promoting the circus in Dar es Salaam. Godfrey had arrived in Germany from Mumbai, via Dubai, to make a brief two-day stop for a business meeting about it. In the car, an inspired Nelson asked Godfrey numerous questions about potential show sponsorship in Tanzania; how much the advertising would cost him,[141] what one publicity man charged versus another, how much work Nelson could get out of one worker versus another, and so on. Finally, a small gap of silence filled the vehicle, and I had the opportunity to ask Godfrey how he found himself working in this sort of business. Sounding pleased to discuss a more personal matter, Godfrey said that before he became an entertainment promoter he had spent four years dealing in the exportation of exotic birds from Tanzania. Some of the birds he caught in the wild, he proudly admitted, while the others he had raised himself. Godfrey said that to this very day, he still knows which zoos some of them are living in. I couldn't help but wonder how smoothly the transition from that kind of job (exporting exotic birds) to this kind of job (importing "rare" entertainers), may, or may not, have been for Godfrey. But there was just no time to ask him, because soon enough we found ourselves safely placed back at the Hamburg venue, and Godfrey was whisked away to the semi-luxurious make-shift 'office' that Nelson had arranged for him to unwind in, before he sat down to watch the show.

Baba Sarakasi Afrika

I have already discussed some of the ways that Ras grappled with the internal ruptures of the Habesha Jugglers, particularly in relation to their pending employment opportunity with Nelson's Baba Sarakasi Afrika in Tanzania. Now I would like to

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Shaggy, and Jay-Z to Tanzania to perform, and was arranging a concert for 50 Cent at the time that I met him.

[141] The sponsors took care of the advertising.

explore three other examples of the artists' hesitations over going to Tanzania with Nelson's show: the other troupe members' responses, the Ethiopian bounce juggling duo's negotiations over their own participation in the circus in Tanzania, and finally, the implicit and explicit 'bartering' techniques that Nelson employed to get the two groups on board with his show in Dar Es Salaam.

Nelson really wanted Hiwot's foot juggling act to be a part of his circus in Tanzania. In fact, she told me, with some hesitation, that he *only* wanted to take her to perform in Africa; he wanted to keep the other five Habesha Jugglers working in Germany instead. So Hiwot had insisted to Nelson that there be no separation of the group, and accordingly, he had agreed to take all of them to Dar es Salaam. Even so, for some time the Habesha Jugglers were very aloof with him about whether or not they were going to wind up signing the contract.

I was sitting in the venue one day, and heard Nelson ask Hiwot if she was going to be coming to Tanzania with him. She didn't really give him an answer. He playfully tried to tempt her, and after she left, he told me that the Habesha Jugglers were afraid that if they went to Tanzania, they wouldn't be able to come back to Germany because of the visa. It simply wasn't true, he said, and it was silly for them to think such a thing. I imagined that Nelson was right, and that getting another visa would be no problem for any members of their troupe; after all, they all had ample travel experience, and, unlike the numerous other Ethiopian circus performers who had "run away" in Europe or the U.S., they had never broken any of the restrictions on their prior visas. What Nelson failed to mention to me, however, and what, I assumed, to be lingering in the minds of some of the Habesha Jugglers, was that in order for them to be able to get

the visas to come back to Europe, Nelson himself (or at least another circus proprietor) had to agree to hire them. And as Ras had said before, they were "Nelson's artists," and would therefore be coming back to work for him, and on his terms.

On the first floor of the crew bus, Nelson was sitting and talking with Hiwot. She had come to him requesting a new table to replace the old one in her foot juggling act. He told her that, of course he could have one made for her in Dar Es Salaam, but that rather than having it shipped to Germany and then all the way back to Tanzania when the Habesha Jugglers would leave Europe to perform for his circus in Dar Es Salaam,[142] she could just wait to start using the new table until the Habesha Jugglers were physically in Tanzania. The only problem with what Nelson was assumptively proposing to her was that the Habesha Jugglers had not yet agreed to go to Tanzania. As I listened to this conversation, I struggled to empathize with Nelson's techniques of persuasion (which seemed much more like manipulation to me), and found it hard to reconcile his tactics with the general high level of care and support that he usually provided his artists with. Yet, although I found his strategies questionable, there was no doubt left as to their effectiveness; Hiwot told me later that she didn't actually want to perform in Tanzania, but she did wish to capitalize on the opportunity for good training that both Nelson's acrobatic school in Dar Es Salaam, as well as access to the new and better props he promised her, would offer.

Nelson also wanted to bring the duo bounce juggling act to Tanzania, and, like Hiwot, Dawit had similar leanings toward the training opportunity that Dar es Salaam would

[142] Several months down the road from the time of this conversation.

provide. This was, at least in part, because Nelson had also promised him the Tanzanian construction of rare and expensive equipment for his unicycle act.[143] Before Dawit was able to make a final decision, however, he had to get the okay from one of the duo's Ethiopian managers, Selassie, who was performing on tour with Urban Vibe Circus in the U.S., and was having disagreements with Nelson over another group of artists whom they both represented, who were working for 'Oh, Afrika!'. Their manager, Selassie, had been arguing with Nelson, their agent, over the quality of their accommodation on the 'Oh, Africa!' tour. Although Selassie agreed that Nassir and Dawit could go to Tanzania, the disagreement got so heated that it eventually led to Nelson's refusal to work with Nassir and Dawit (whom he very much wanted to work with) unless they signed a legally binding document that they would not be simultaneously working with Selassie.[144] Even if he got the go ahead, Dawit explained to me, he would still face another dilemma. The gig in Tanzania didn't pay much when compared with what the act would make performing in Europe or the U.S. Dawit knew that if they went to Tanzania, it would be a good opportunity to improve their skills. On the other hand, if they went, for example, to the U.S. to perform, their skill level would not really increase because they would always be doing the same things in performance, rather than, with the appropriate time, space, and materials, pushing themselves to master new and higher level tricks. He asked what I thought he should do. I said that it was better for them to look at the bigger picture; Tanzania would only be about a four or five month commitment, and may well be worth it because, with the harder tricks they could learn there, the twosome could make better money in the long run. He agreed.

[143] The prop was a raised marble table with steps that Dawit could move up and down on, on his unicycle.
[144] They did not sign the agreement.

Home

The significantly lower salaries they would be earning in Tanzania coupled with fears over obtaining future visas for Europe, led a handful of Circus of Africa's artists, particularly the Ethiopians, to hesitate over taking the job. There was a seeming contradiction between a desire to, in several years and with pockets full, *choose* to return to Africa as the ultimate home where one could build for him or herself the "good life," and the fear of getting forcibly stuck in an undeveloped Africa midway through a tour without a way to get out again. This fear formed an underlying threat to the self-proclaimed freedom that the Habesha Jugglers, and other performers with Circus of Africa, had earned while performing abroad. Apart from the potential loss of transnational freedom, there was also a fear that lay with some of the performers about what returning to Africa (for however brief a period of stay) without large amounts of hard currency, would mean for their social standing within various networks back at home. I would like to use Amri's story as a case study to illustrate the point.

Amri told me that after Circus of Africa's tour the previous year there had been a two-month break. Nelson asked him and his partner Zawadi[145] if they wanted to go back to Tanzania to train at his acrobatics school during the gap. The duo declined, he said, because they had both spent all of their money, and didn't want to deal with going back to Africa empty handed. He explained that if he were to go back to Africa after performing abroad in Europe, and he didn't have money, it would be a real problem. Since he had been given the rare opportunity to leave Tanzania, people in Africa generally assumed that he would be rich when he came back. They wanted him to

[145] Zawadi was the lead contortionist (out of four) in the act. The year prior, it had been only himself and Amri in the contortion act.

help them, and he wanted to help them and they didn't believe him if he said he didn't have money. An understanding Nelson hooked them up with 'Oh, Africa!'[146] for the two-month break so they could spend their gap time in Germany, rather than having to face the uncomfortable situation at home. Amri told me that he had learned from this past situation, and that now he "can survive". He was planning for his future. He wanted to help his mother, whom he missed very much. When the house he was having built was finished,[147] he said, he would be able to "do two things at once": something for himself (i.e., performing in a circus), while simultaneously earning extra money from renting out rooms. A lot of people had asked him why he didn't try to get permanent residency in Germany. He said, simply, that he could not. Amri knew "for what he's here (in Europe)"; he was here to work. He also knew that he wanted to live out the rest of his life in his own country.

Even some of the artists who came from more conservative families garnered support from their relatives back home when it came to the opportunity to work and earn money in Europe. Nassir, for instance, was talking to me about how his family felt about him performing circus in Europe. He had come from a fairly well off, large, traditional Muslim home in northern Ethiopia, and had gone very much against the grain when he opted to pursue his dream of living a life in the circus. Silently, and as subtly as possible, rejecting the implicit persuasions of his family to help out with the family business, get a good education,[148] and marry into a respected Muslim family, Nassir spent the majority of his youth playing football before he discovered the circus. When he did start out doing circus, he kept it a secret from his family for three years,

[146] As non-performing members of the tour.
[147] Until then, he had a room furnished with the basics (a couch, bed, and not much more) that he shared with his grandmother when he was at home in Tanzania.
[148] He did, however, at his father's request, attend a three-year college program in computer maintenance.

many times skipping school in order to practise circus and juggling. By the time he let them know what he was up to, Nassir felt confident that he was already involved enough in circus that his family couldn't undo the thick commitment that had been years in the making. He was right. They accepted his choice with an uncharacteristic open-mindedness for a family of their stature in Ethiopia. After that, Nassir often chose to sleep in very rough conditions with his friends, some of whom had little choice because most of them came from poorer families, at the circus, rather than stay in his family's well-to-do home. The two of us were talking late one night as we walked through the cold crisp air by a river in Cologne, our feet numb and stinging from the weather's bite, when I asked Nassir about how his family felt about him doing circus. Compared with other families in Ethiopia, he said, his father left him "free" to do as he pleased, but he felt his family was neither supportive nor unsupportive of his doing circus. They were, however, happy he was in Europe. Why, I asked. To which he replied that maybe it was because he had "found (his) way."

Like Nassir's "way," Abebe's 'way' involved working abroad before he eventually planned to settle down in Ethiopia. During a conversation in the catering area one afternoon, he expressed his feelings about wanting to live in Ethiopia long term, while seeing the choice of working in a circus abroad as the best way to make that happen. Unlike some of the other artists I had talked to about the issue, who, like Naledi, had outlined an arbitrary[149] time line for how long they needed to be working outside of their home country in order to amass the various forms of capital that would benefit them back in Africa, Abe's feelings were quite implicitly wavering, demonstrating that perhaps this wasn't such a clear-cut matter after all. "It was always my dream,"

[149] It seemed to me, anyway.

Abebe told me, to make it to Europe and the United States, but: "now I know (both) Europe life, (and) African life." Just as Abebe had told me that, before coming to Europe, "all the information" he had seen about Western life through the Ethiopian media, he had very much believed to be true; whereas now, with the help of his current cosmopolitan insight, it all only amounted to what was essentially "a big dream," whose false promises Abe was now capable of seeing through. However, it was the opportunity to perform and to "make good money" before he returned to Ethiopia that kept Abebe on the international circus trajectory for the unforeseeable future.

Running

Ras, who was getting tired, had only a slightly more specific strategy than Abebe's in mind. He wanted to stop performing, but still needed a way to make good money and stay abroad and in the circus business. Nelson had provided him, like so many other African circus artists, with what seemed to be an example of how to do just that. It was just a few days after I had arrived on Circus of Africa's tour, and Ras and I were walking - more like meandering - around the forgettable German town we found ourselves in that day. We talked to our hearts' content, touching on a broad spectrum of subject matters as we wound around alongside the river, but, as usual, found ourselves concentrating mostly on Ras' circus life abroad. He told me that he only wanted to perform for one more year, and then intended on becoming an agent. That way, he said, he would have the option of whether or not to tour with a circus; and in this world (it appeared to me), increasing one's options was essential. Practically speaking, however, a shift towards promoter would be, for Ras, an important step in the process of "want(ing) to start a new life." He thought he had learned well how one

could do that sort of job just from hearing everyone's stories of how they got to Circus of Africa. But in the long run, like so many others, Ras eventually wanted to settle down in Ethiopia.

We talked about circus in Ethiopia, and I mentioned the first group of Ethiopians who had run away in Australia in the early 1990s. He kind of laughed, and said that a lot of Ethiopians ran away. Fifteen boys (in three separate groups) from Abyssinia Circus, ran away in Germany, he said, and as a consequence, they didn't have papers for five years. Now they did, but no longer performed because the group disbanded. One of the boys was even the so-called top circus performer in Ethiopia. The German embassy in Addis Ababa was very wary about issuing Ethiopians visas now, Ras said, because so many had run away abroad. One group ran after only three days of performance, Ras told me. This, however, was changing a bit because of Nelson's efforts; he wanted to establish a good relationship with the embassy in Addis (as he had done with the German embassy in Tanzania). Ras said that some Ethiopians who didn't want to work for Afrikan Fire's David, ran after they got to Europe. Nelson had asked Melaku to talk to a group from his circus in Ethiopia, who were working with David, and tell them: "Don't run"; that if they didn't want to work for David, Nelson would take care of them instead. That way it wouldn't become a problem for Nelson to get visas for Ethiopian circus performers coming to Europe in the future. Wary German Embassies in Africa weren't the only obstacles Nelson had to overcome to get his circus ball rolling, however; the structure of the circus Board in Ethiopia proved to be a little challenging as well.

Ras told me the Ethiopian government indirectly controlled the Ethiopian circus Board. If one of the main circuses got an international contract, the money went through the Board, and would be split with the other circuses. And if a circus got an international contract, the performers were all under the control of the troupe.[150] The board knew everything and, Ras added, it was very corrupt. "It's going the wrong way, the money…. This is (the) wrong, wrong way. The money's going sssshhhhhooooomp," he said as he waved his hand like a curvy snake. The artists didn't know where the money was going for their international performances. They might get a measly sum after returning to Ethiopia from a three month European tour. After China, the Habesha Jugglers were off the grid in terms of the Board. They were a good example of what Nelson was aiming for, and what was just starting to crop up in his home country, Ras said. Nelson wanted to get independent Ethiopian artists around the Board, and bring them to Europe unattached to anyone other than him.

"Hard Work"

Despite the fact that like Ras, Abebe eventually longed to go back to Ethiopia, he had emphasized a certain pride he felt when, alongside his fellow Ethiopians in Circus of Africa he could do everything that "white people" could. In fact, although European life was "nothing" for him and he wanted to live out his life in Ethiopia, Abe said that he wished that Ethiopia itself could actually be a bit like Europe. He wanted Ethiopia to have "hard work," he told me. White people knew how to work hard, Abebe said, and if you have "hard work, (then) your country's developed." I asked him why he thought development was important, and he said it's "especially (important) in Africa (where there's) not good people, not good life, not good food… I wish Africa (was)

[150] A set up that was closer to that of China than it was to the United States, for example (where circus performers were independent players).

like Europe."[151] If, during his lifetime, Abebe could witness significant development in Africa, then he would be happy. If you "work good (then you can have a)… good life… good sleeping, good food, good everything." Contrary to Abe's belief that if he worked hard performing abroad, he would be rewarded with a good life, Ethiopian circus itself had made no such promise; the "life there (in Ethiopian circuses) is nothing; so difficult…. If you perform, (you don't get) good money - only food, something like that."

Our conversation was scattered with Abe's emphasis on the importance of "hard work" and "good work" as being the keys to Ethiopia's future development, in all respects.[152] On a personal level, the most important thing for Abe was his family, but, in order to help his family (and by doing so, indirectly, Ethiopia as an extension of it), he needed to "make good money." In order to make good money, he needed to work hard, practise, and improve his circus skills so that he could have more acts that were more "perfect" and then, accordingly, make more of this "good money." I asked Abebe when he thought he would go home to Ethiopia. "I don't know," he replied. "I need good money, then I (will) go."[153] How would he know when he had made this, "good money" I asked him. To which Abe could only say: "The work, it continues."

"Money from my Sweat"

The explicit ties between hard work and good money were made by more of the cast of Circus of Africa than just Abebe. Jina also stressed to me that she must work hard, to "have a good life", before she could even begin to think about what would come

[151] Abebe particularly mentioned violent conflicts as being problematic.
[152] Here I'm talking about economic, national, cultural, and corporeal.
[153] After Abe made, "good money", like many of my interlocutors, he planned on setting up another business, but wasn't sure what kind. He told me he would decide that later on.

next. "In order to have a good life, I need to have money; and money from my *sweat*, not from my family," she said. Jina told me that a good life meant that she could "get whatever I need"; and she needed money to do that. Her family had money;[154] one of her brothers was living in the United States, and had wanted her to come and live with him, but she said that she would give it three years to try to make it on her own first. In Africa, women were low in the hierarchy, and a "house woman (was) nothing in the house." Jina had no intention of succumbing to such a fate: "I want to work hard… I want to have my own life." "Maybe if I (had) stayed in Tanzania, now I would have two or three babies… (and have) end(ed) up (as a) house woman. There's nothing else you can do (there)." In Circus of Africa, she tried to perform better every single day, so that she knew that she was really "working for that money." She said that if the money she earned in this show weren't enough to meet her needs, she wouldn't be happy performing in the show.

Jina's emphasis on hard work was clearly connected to the first of her four experiences training in China. She told me that when she got to the school in Huáxīng, that first year of acrobatics was really, really hard. She said that she was always crying – something that, at the time, I found hard to imagine coming from a woman who consciously carried herself with a graceful sense of pride[155] - but was able to convince herself that because she was an adult now, she therefore must practise and work hard "so in the future, I can be me." Jina told me that she just wouldn't be the same Jina had it not been for her experience in China; it had been

[154] Her mother was an assistant director of cultural development in Tanzania.
[155] During the tour I saw Jina cry when she felt that she had made too many mistakes when performing her magic act. This kind of perfectionist approach to the work was not uncommon. One could say it was even fundamental to having a good act in the show. The artists in Circus of Africa who didn't have it were often picked on for their poor and sloppy performances, or lack of practicing time, and were well aware that they probably wouldn't be asked back for the next tour.

extremely poignant in shaping her life. And, as she elaborated: "What I do - it's what will be my life." Which meant that, since Jina did magic, "Magic is my life. But," Jina continued, "magic is from China."

China in Europe

A few days after I arrived on tour, I was in the hallway talking with Melaku. He had his arm around me, and asked me (as he so often wound up doing in those first few weeks) if everything was okay, and if I was happy there. I said absolutely, without a doubt, yes. He asked me what I liked, and what I didn't like about being on the tour. I replied that, so far, there was nothing I had found that I didn't really like, and that I liked that we travelled everyday, the openness and warmth of the people in the show, and, most of all, that I could see the Habesha Jugglers here in Europe, and in this life. "It's not China," I offered as a bit of a cynical after thought. Melaku responded immediately by defending the experience he had been so quick to condemn to me not so long ago (and thousands of kilometres away). Now he didn't hate China, he assured me, he liked China because it had brought him here to Circus of Africa. Melaku's response surprised me a little considering that he had recently stated with pride that, after I got to know them in China, he was glad I was seeing them here in Circus of Africa, where "we are free." Melaku later told me that not only would he go back to China if given the option. In fact, he proclaimed, he desired to go back one day, and was determined to see it happen.[156]

[156] Maharene also intended to train for six months in Huáxīng after Circus of Africa ended. The visa would now be no problem for her, and her brother, himself training in China at the time, was currently getting the application ready, she explained.

Freedom

By the time he was in Europe, Melaku liked China because it had brought him to Circus of Africa where he could be "free," and make "good money" through "hard work." Needless to say, the thought of returning to Africa anytime in the near future, either to work in Nelson's Tanzanian show, or for other possible reasons, was not high on the list of priorities - for Melaku or any of Circus of Africa's other artists. For example, the bind that Dawit found himself about going to Tanzania was conjured up again in a conversation I had had with him in which we were discussing the relationship between money and freedom, and what different effects they may have on a circus performer from a wealthy country, and one from a poorer country. Dawit felt that the very real capitals of both money and freedom, equally shaped the situation a circus performer from a poor country found himself in when he was performing internationally. But there was a difference, Dawit said, between the existential state of "being free," and "freedom" itself, as a type of capital. To "have freedom," he continued, a person must first be "oppressed." Dawit explained that the circus performer from a rich country who performed abroad was not oppressed in the first place, so he could never really have freedom. Before he left Ethiopia, Dawit said, he felt oppressed; but now, in Germany, he felt he had freedom. I asked him to elaborate a bit on what he meant. In Ethiopia, he could pay rent, and have a little money left over for clothes, but then, soon after, the money was gone. This situation meant that he was "at risk." For what, I asked. For his future, Dawit replied. On top of decreasing his risk for the future by performing circus abroad, Dawit explained that a circus performer from a poor country would also gain greater happiness from doing his job than one from a rich country would, because the artist from the poor country would be both simultaneously increasing his money *and* doing what he loved. In

contrast, Dawit said, a circus performer from the rich country could have earned the same, if not more, money working in another profession. Dawit told me that he knew he would not be able to perform circus for the rest of his life, and because of that, he must have a good future by it, which meant that he must save his money now. Of course, Dawit was certainly not the only one thinking about the future.

Choice

Also thinking about a good future, devoid of "risk," were the Habesha Jugglers, who had finally come to a semi-collective decision to go to Tanzania for Nelson's show. Near the end of the tour, I walked out of a dressing room and ran into Melaku. We sat down, and began talking in the abandoned stairway (the two of us seemed to always wind up talking like that on tour, in abandoned stairways). He gave me one of the two boxes of chocolate his European girlfriend had brought to the show for him. He wanted to share this gift with his younger-older sister, he said with a laugh. We talked about still having one month to go on tour, and how, since the Habesha Jugglers had decided to go to Tanzania, we would all meet again in Dar es Salaam. I ask him how he felt about going to Tanzania. He said he was neither happy nor unhappy about it, but he did like it when his "friends" (i.e., the Habesha Jugglers) went the same way. He didn't want to split up from them. His relationship with Ras had changed from when the group was in China, but he still looked to him like an older brother; Melaku did what Ras told him to do, and respected Ras greatly, but it just wasn't the same as before Germany, he said. Sometimes there were problems between himself and Gebre, or between Gebre and Abebe, and all the while Ras would be silent, thinking many things, or Melaku himself would be thinking many things. I asked Melaku why he decided to go to Tanzania after all, and he replied, "I didn't have a choice". "What

do you mean you didn't have a choice?" I asked. "What choice do I have?" he matter-of-factly fired back. To which I could say nothing, because, in one way, he was absolutely right. Melaku told me that he could, perhaps, alternatively stay in Germany "by many ways" (e.g., keeping shop or getting married), but for now he wanted to continue moving, "by this way." That meant he would be chasing his lone rat all the way to Tanzania.

Out of the responses the Habesha Jugglers gave me regarding their decision to go to Tanzania, it was Gebre's whose was the most forthright, and also the most positive. I was talking with him, Zawadi, and Zulan outside of the mixed bus, one night. As we watched the technicians head out for a disco, we spoke about circus and their dreams of the future. Gebre had a lot of ideas running around in his mind about what he wanted to do. He told me that, like many of the other artists in the show, his main goal was to eventually become a circus agent like Nelson. And with that thought, the topic of conversation changed to the immediate future, and then, accordingly, to thoughts of Tanzania. Gebre explained that the Habesha Jugglers had finally decided to take the job in Tanzania, because Nelson had done something for them when they were in China by bringing them to Europe to perform in Circus of Africa. Now, by agreeing to perform in his Africa-based show, they were returning the favour; they were thinking of Nelson's needs, and they were doing something for him. If the Habesha Jugglers "ran away" now, Gebre said, later on Nelson most likely wouldn't help them. But if they obliged him with this move, then later on it would be another story. Then Nelson would help them when they needed it most.

Yoking obligatory agreements to do the show in Tanzania was just one way of guaranteeing that Nelson's artists were loyal to him. A far more effective strategy was maintaining the broader promise, whether it was illusory or not, that he had secured work for them in the future. For example, one night Nassir was talking with Nelson downstairs on the crew bus. They were discussing the possibility of sending a video of Nassir and Dawit in Circus of Africa that had been shot with Nelson's professional video camera, to the duo's second manager, Teka, who would then send it out to other circuses on Dawit's and Nassir's behalf. Nelson was not particularly fond of Teka, who was steadily evolving into a potential competitor of his. And although Nelson didn't officially represent the duo, he had oftentimes let them know that he wanted to. He told Nassir that he already knew where he was putting everyone in the cast right after this tour was over, and he had places for all of them already set up – guaranteed work, Nelson vaguely assured him. Around the same time, Ras told me that the Habesha Jugglers probably had a six-month contract at a very well reputed dinner cabaret show in München (Munich) directly after the tour was to end. It would be a very good set up, he said. They would be able to stay in one city, get paid well, and perform for "rich people." When I asked him if it was definite, he answered that Nelson had said so. But he does this, Ras added: "He says (such and such)." Ras paused for a moment. "And (then) he goes" and Ras gestured a hand moving off in a very different direction. Later on, towards the very end of the tour, I was talking with Nelson outside of a German venue. He was telling me about the one-month tour in Spain that would take place later on in the summer. I asked him if it was set in stone. He chuckled, and replied that, in this business, he only believed it *after* the contracts had been signed. Even then, one could never be too sure.[157]

[157] The Spain tour, after all the contracts had been signed, was supposed to be a done deal. Some of the

Nelson had a way of talking people into doing things without them knowing it, Ras once told me. He meant it as a compliment. I couldn't help but to think back to this observation one sunny day in Austria, as Abebe and I, surrounded by beautiful, snow-covered mountain peaks, walked along a river and talked. Abebe, who was left out of the group's decision-making process, had just found out the previous night that the Habesha Jugglers had officially agreed to go to Tanzania. Ras told him in a group meeting right before they went on stage for the night's performance. As Abe talked to me about this future move to Tanzania, he didn't necessarily seem happy about it, and when I inquired as to how he was feeling on the matter, he only replied that it was "Africa" (implying that African life was hard). Then again, Abe said, the Habesha Jugglers were "African," so they should be able to handle it.

Despite the fact that the Habesha Jugglers were "African" so they, according to Abe, should be able to handle a Tanzanian show run, Nelson's seasoned expertise and sensitivity to his African artists hesitating to comply with their agreements caused alarm bells to go off in his head. Nelson sensed a problem coming on, and was not shy to try to nip it in the bud. Before one of the final shows a few days prior to the end of the Circus of Africa tour, I was typing up my notes in the luxurious Swiss catering area we found ourselves in that day. Nelson had called a meeting with the Habesha Jugglers, and they all sat around a table that was, randomly, only several metres away from the one I was sitting at, which enabled me to hear everything that was said. Nelson began what was essentially a lecture, giving every reason he could for the

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artists said their plane tickets had already been bought. Nonetheless, because of problems getting visas for a good number of the performers, the tour collapsed at the last second. However, eventually Circus of Africa did wind up in Spain for the last three and a half weeks of the next year's tour (with Schengen visas that had been issued by German authorities, rather than Spanish).

group not to run away at the end of the tour. He tried to persuade them with promises of more work, particularly a not-too-long-in-the-future tour in Spain that was supposedly sure to be happening. He tried to threaten them by insisting there were looming structural procedures in place that ensured that if they decided to run, they *would* get caught. And he insisted that if they ran, his hands would be clean. The group was completely silent. Not a word was uttered by any of the six of them. And after he said his piece, the meeting was over.

Closing Night

We were in Italy for the last show of the tour. As call time neared, it became apparent that Pierre was nowhere to be found. I didn't think anything of it at first because it had been quite a hectic day, spent mostly with the artists unpacking, repacking, and throwing away anything that would tip the scales of the meagre weight limits their flights home would allow them. Luggage had been thrown outside all around the buses for most of the afternoon. The girls' dressing rooms were littered with worn out bags, and cheap garments left behind for any cleaning woman (or anthropologist) that cared to take the time go through the performers' leftovers. The back stage was buzzing, everyone moving to and fro, amped up on the soon-to-be nostalgic excitement that would hopefully be channelled into the final show of the season. And then there was Nelson. Already informed that Pierre was unaccounted for, as he passed me in the hall, he stopped for a split second, laughed in a very unfunny way, and said that Pierre had run. I jumped to my friend's defence, claiming that there was no way he would have done that. Absolutely no way. He must have gotten lost in town, I said. I meant every word, but a circus worldly Nelson didn't even pause to consider my argument. He just knew.

It wasn't long before I became frantic with worry; not for the Pierre who had skipped out on Circus of Africa's last stand to grab the opportunities that a potentially unlimited stay in Europe would allow him, but for the Pierre who at that very moment must have been struggling to find his way back to the venue as the time for the opening dance crept closer and closer. He was one of the two main drummers in the show, which simply couldn't go on without him. Or so I thought.

In the remainder of the time before the curtain was raised, two tall and burly Italian policemen showed up, apparently at the request of a stressed out Dietrich. They asked me what I knew about the missing artist, and I, still naïve as could be about what was going on, insisted that he was lost. He had a brother who lived in Torino, I said, and who was supposed to come to the show that night, and Pierre would have made sure his brother got to see him perform. It would be some time before I deeply regrettably realized that what I told the two officers, information intended to serve in eventually locating Pierre in order to help him, could actually become problematic for him considering the sketchy nature of his disappearance. The clock kept ticking, and I kept roaming the halls, expecting to see his lovely sarcastic face turn the corner at any minute. It didn't. My heart sank as the lights dimmed, but I was still not one hundred percent convinced that Nelson had guessed right. I photographed the show as I always did, but I was sad. And it wasn't just I who felt it; there was a weird feeling on stage infecting most of the performers that night, with Pierre's absence trumping any sense of exuberance involved in what was going on in front of the eyes of the audience.

That night there were only two buses on the move, both heading for Frankfurt, where the artists would all fly home from the following day.[158] Gerda and I stayed on bus number two, Pierre's bus, where there was supposed to be a big party. There wasn't. The feeling on the bus was decidedly anti-climactic, but no one overtly mentioned our comrade's untimely disappearance. The only reference at all came from the non-stop comedian, Abasi, who picked though Pierre's left behind luggage, and announced his happiness at acquiring a brand spankin' new pair of deserted and expensive trainers. What a sad end to the unbelievable season, I thought. Little did I know, it wasn't over just yet.

The Morning After

The next day, we were all at the airport, seeing off the groups one by one. Dietrich was overseeing their departures, and was frantically running from terminal to terminal to make sure everyone got off well. In the chaos of Dietrich's airport wanderings, and the close times of some of the artists' flights, Dawit and Nassir missed their flight. They would have to stay for three extra days in Germany to wait for the next Egypt Air flight out to Addis Ababa, and they went with Dietrich, Gerda, and me to see off the remainder of the cast. The Habesha Jugglers were the last group to go, but when it was time, Ras was nowhere to be found. He didn't show up for his flight, and the group left silently without him, avoiding any comment surrounding their missing captain. With nothing left to do, Dietrich, Gerda, Nassir, Dawit, and I went back to the hotel rooms that awaited us. Two people had run – not just two people, two of my closest friends on the tour - and one of them was a Habesha Juggler! I just couldn't

[158] The crew bus drove the technicians back home.

believe how at the last minute, everything could be thrown into such complete upheaval without much warning at all.

That night, I couldn't help but think about whether or not anyone could have predicted (or had actually known beforehand) the events that were to unfold in the past twelve hours. Earlier that morning, Pierre had stopped me in the hallway and asked for my UK phone number. I was in a rush, and joked with him (in our usual way) that I would never give him my number because I never wanted him to call me. Shortly afterwards, he asked again. I gave him the same sarcastic reply, and then said I'd give it to him later. If only I had known that that was the last opportunity I would have. He must have known then; why else would he have insisted to get my contact information then, and not later? That was the only sign to indicate his running, I thought. But looking back on all of my discussions with Ras, and his growing frustrations at what looked to be a slow dissolution of the Habesha Jugglers, I started to think that maybe it had been a little more obvious after all. Time had run out, and their searches for alternative means to extend their presences in Germany were not met with success, as neither Gebre nor Ras wound up marrying German women.

The day after the Habesha Jugglers returned to Ethiopia from Germany, and the second night I was at the hotel in Frankfurt and Nelson, Naledi and Zulan joined Dawit, Nassir, and me.[159] I visited Naledi in her hotel room, and she told me that Ras had called Nelson that very day, asking to go back to Ethiopia after all. She had seen him at the airport when the trio went to meet him to make sure he actually left. She said he looked really bad. I would later hear from Gerda that apparently he had gone

[159] Their flight to South Africa was the following day, and they had spent the previous night at Jürgen's house.

to see Afrikan Fire's David, to ask to help him stay in Europe. David refused to assist Ras because of the fact that the Habesha Jugglers never gave David a ten percent cut of their salaries from Circus of Africa as he had demanded they do. Ras' visa only had a few more days left on it, and he had to leave Europe as soon as possible or face the consequences. So it was with humility that he turned to Nelson. Circus of Africa bought him a new ticket home to Ethiopia, and Nelson never wanted to work with him again.

Conclusion

When Dawit told me that he thought ninety percent of the Ethiopians who "ran away" were economic refugees, I would have initially agreed with him. But knowing the two Circus of Africa men who split as I did (even though Ras *did* go back in the end), I didn't think the situation was necessarily that simple. Ras was a generous, non-materialistic man without any form of family to support back in Ethiopia. And whether it was through Nelson, or another promoter, the Habesha Jugglers would definitely have found good work abroad again; work that would have paid well, and work that would have given them the opportunity to travel the world for an extensive period of time. Of course, any circus performance they could do in Ethiopia wouldn't be lucrative at all, but, again, they had a great international career waiting ahead of them. So what was it, then, that made the urge to stay so desperate that one could consider giving all of that up for it?

When I contemplated this question, what came to mind the most was something that Asante had casually said to me one day as he sewed costumes in a venue in Germany. He said he loved the life on Circus of Africa's tour, because, as far as the performers

in the show were concerned "here it's good (because) we're free." This was not the only time I heard such a sentiment from my fellow Circus of Africans. Melaku happily echoed this statement, but in reference to the contrast between the Habesha Jugglers being on tour in Europe versus their exchange training in China. Dawit likewise felt he had obtained "freedom" in Circus of Africa, compared with the state of "oppression" he experienced in Ethiopia, and directly connected it to his capacity to earn "good money" through "hard work," as did Abe, Jina, and many other artists on the tour. And yet, interestingly enough, it was Melaku who connected those things he loved most about being on the tour with a sense of being "valued" by Nelson, making it clear that he wasn't really talking about monetary value in this case.

Of course, the freedom that they had, and the money they could make in Europe, America, in Circus of Africa and elsewhere, was important for the Habesha Jugglers and the rest of the artists in the show. But returning to Ethiopia, or other countries in Africa, wasn't just a matter of returning to face a lack of economic opportunity at home, or working for 'corrupt' circuses that were labelled so in part because their funding was sparse in comparison with their flashy European counterparts; it was a matter of going back to a life in which one's *worth* was measured by the meagre salaries leftover after the circus Board had skimmed the majority of the groups' earnings off the top; or, in Gebre's case, by a lack of the bare bones necessity medical equipment that could keep another sick body alive for a few more years. It was a matter of going back to a life that could never be measured, and therefore *lived*, on their own terms. As Melaku said, it was that sense of being *valued,* which could be perceived in terms of people's willingness to open doors for them, coupled with the

freedom that those opened doors entailed, and not just being paid a wage that was "good enough for Africa" that was at the heart of the matter here.

So given that, it struck me deeply when, one night, I was downstairs on the crew bus, and we were speeding along the tarmac and into the late hours. Gerda, Günther, a lighting technician, and Fritz, were engrossed in conversation, talking rapidly alongside me in German. I asked them what they were so interested in, and Gerda explained that they were speculating about the differences between Africa and Germany for the artists on tour, and how much they must have to adapt to European life. Günther said he thought it was good for them to be here, in Germany. He thought they liked it. I asked him why, not having discussed the matter with any of the Africans on tour, he made such an assumption. Günther replied that, here in Germany, the Africans "can consume things," they could "consume girls," and they could do all this while simultaneously making money for their poor families back in Africa. I bit my tongue, knowing that despite whatever Günther may have thought, it wasn't always that glamorous or straightforward.

CONCLUSION

The End

"A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song."

- Joan Walsh Anglund via Maya Angelou

Afterward: The End of The Habesha Jugglers

After the 2008 Circus of Africa tour ended, the Habesha Jugglers returned to Ethiopia. With the exception of Maharene they all lived together in a house they rented in Addis Ababa, and rather than returning to their respective homes and home circuses, they rented time in a local gym located several blocks from their house to practice their acts instead. It wasn't a circus gym; it was just a normal gym, but it gave them the time and space to do what they needed to do. Immediately upon their return, however, Maharene stopped contacting the troupe. Several months later they found out that she had talked with Nelson about training at his school in Tanzania as a solo artist. He wanted to give her a chance, so he flew her out to Dar es Salaam, where she began working on a foot juggling act that he could use for his show. She never returned to the Habesha Jugglers.

Having lost Maharene, the remaining five Habesha Jugglers were itching to "go out" from Ethiopia again. Ras got in touch with Afrikan Fire's David, and they finally paid him the sum of money he had been claiming they owed him. He agreed to help them get back to Europe, and began what would become a very slow process. After three months of uneasy waiting for their visas to go through, they still hadn't heard

anything, and continued to spend their time practicing and training their acts. Around the same time, Nelson contacted one of the circus performers from the first group of Ethiopians on exchange, Tesfaye (their "captain", and also a rising agent for Ethiopian circus artists), and told him he wanted Abebe, Hiwot, and Gebre to come work on his Circus of Africa tour in Spain. Hiwot and Gebre made the choice to refuse to work with Nelson if he wasn't going to bring the entire group, but Abebe decided that he could not miss the opportunity that he was presented with. Unsure of how long it would take David to get their European visas to go through, Abe collected his passport and, like Maharene, opted to go out on his own. With sadness, he let the other members of the Habesha Jugglers know that he would be leaving them, and always believed they were very understanding of his decision.

A few short weeks after Abebe left Ethiopia for Spain, the Habesha Jugglers' European visas finally went through. Now a group of four, they travelled together to Belgium, where they worked for several months for David. That work, for the two female artists, supposedly entailed dancing at Davis's wife's strip bar in Düren, where she employed foreign dancers who would work for her without proper legal papers. In the meantime, Ras had been in contact with Barry, Urban Vibe Circus' founder; they had sent him a video from Ethiopia, and he wanted to bring them to his 2009 tour in the United States. Urban Vibe Circus worked out their visas while the troupe was in Europe, and, just as they had done with Nelson's help when they had travelled to Germany straight from China without going back to Ethiopia, the remaining Habesha Jugglers flew from Europe straight to the U.S., without returning home again.

The troupe already knew that things in the circus business rarely went exactly as they were planned, but their fatal experience with Urban Vibe Circus still caught them out in left field. In preparation for the Habesha Jugglers to join the Urban Vibe Circus tour, Barry had sent them a high-energy hip-hop track, and had them re-choreograph their acts, combining club juggling, bounce juggling, and foot juggling in a single go, one skill following the next in succession. The troupe had practiced what they thought was asked of them, so when the act wasn't working upon their incorporation into the show, they were surprised to say the least. Within a couple months of being on the tour, the group's juggling act was pulled from the production because Barry didn't feel that their presence in the ring was up to par with the extremely high energy and high skill level of what the audience expected from an Urban Vibe Circus experience.

Barry decided to try to keep Hiwot's foot juggling in the show, but he placed her in an act with two Chinese foot jugglers who had to slow down their expert tricks tremendously when she joined them so as not to make her look at a lower level than they were. At the same time, the Habesha Jugglers also did promotions for Urban Vibe Circus but were not involved in the main production. They carried on like that through the end of the 2009 tour. Despite the fact that three of the four remaining Habesha Jugglers weren't performing an act in the show, Barry still had some ideas about how to use their skills for the following year's production. During the break between tours, he sent Melaku to Las Vegas with three other members of Urban Vibe Circus's talent to train a new quick change act that he wanted in the 2010 show. He also sent Ras, Gebre, and Hiwot to Atlanta to work on a teeterboard act with a large group of performers from Gabon, South Africa, and Guinea (Conakry). When the 2010 tour started up, the teeterboard act was an initial success, but the quick change

act was pulled out quickly. Then, midway through the tour, three of the Habesha Jugglers got the bad news: Ras, Hiwot, and Melaku were no longer needed in the show. They would be flying back to Ethiopia that very same day. Barry had decided to cut back in the teeterboard act, and since Ras just pushed[160] in the act, and Hiwot also was really just a support, neither one was involved in any of the important tricks and could easily be taken out. And Melaku wasn't performing at all at that point. In the 'out of the blue', sniper style that Urban Vibe Circus had become famous for amongst its performers, the three Habesha Jugglers were going back to Ethiopia in the snap of a finger.

Ras, who had roughly 20 USD to his name at that point, had been doing other jobs on tour, such as ushering and Stage Crew, and he most likely had the choice to remain on tour working with Urban Vibe Circus in that capacity, but for far less pay. That option was not so appealing to him, yet in his mind, he was also adamant about not returning to Ethiopia. Ras decided the better "way" out of the tour was to marry an American woman he had become romantically involved with after she had come to watch the show the previous year. Melaku and Hiwot, on the other hand, had no recourse to fall back on, and they took the last minute flights offered them back to Addis Ababa. Because of his talent as a tumbler, the circus still wanted to keep Gebre with them as a flyer for the teeterboard act, as well as to work in a trampoline act they had going on. He had an issue with renewing his visa, however, and that meant that he would need to return for a very brief stay in Addis Ababa to get things sorted. Urban Vibe Circus bought his round-trip ticket, and paid for his hotel in Ethiopia, but Gebre was hesitant to trust them. There were other performers in the show who had been supposed to fly

[160] Meaning he jumped onto the teeterboard to send the flyer up towards the catcher.

back to Africa to deal with these kinds of logistical issues in the past, and subsequently return to the tour, but some of them had never come back. Urban Vibe Circus try to persuade Gebre of the simplicity of the scenario, but instead of trusting what the circus was telling him, at the last minute, the last official member of the Habesha Jugglers, Gebre, decided to make a run for it. And just like that, the Habesha Jugglers were no more.

After the group fell apart, its former members all went their separate courses, and, to one extent or another, they managed to find their own "ways" in the world, though not necessarily in the ways they would have previously imagined or hoped for. Maharene still works for Nelson as one of "his artists", and he often includes her on his Circus of Africa tours, or books her on other large-scale gigs. Melaku moved to Germany for good, marrying the Polish Germany-based girlfriend he had been involved with since the early days of Circus of Africa. He has built up a relatively stable career teaching and performing circus on his own locally to school children. After Urban Vibe Circus, Hiwot started working seriously on a hula-hoop act in Ethiopia, where she was 'stuck' for almost two years after a short stint in Dubai. Eventually she secured a contract with the newly re-instated production of 'Oh, Africa!', but once in Germany, her act wasn't working for the show. She found out that she was going to be cut and sent back to Ethiopia, but before they could get her on a plane she, like Gebre, also ran. As far as I understand, she is not performing circus anymore. Gebre currently resides in the U.S, where he settled after running from Urban Vibe Circus. He still performs fairly regularly with a relatively small scale 'African' circus, Yéle Yéle Circus, and has a successful career as a DJ in the Ethiopian expat community around the Las Vegas area. Abebe continued to "work hard", and joined forces with Tesfaye, who

had since built up his own group and was working successfully as an agent. Abebe became a successful leader in the troupe, and is currently performing a Chinese pole act with Urban Vibe Circus. The Habesha Jugglers' leader, Ras, never went back to circus life, but instead worked a series of smaller jobs, including cleaning bathrooms in a pub, warehouse labour, bagging groceries, and making pizza. His marriage dissolved after roughly two years. He believed this was in part due to the fact that he was no longer a glamorous circus performer travelling the world; instead he was just another Ethiopian who was doing small, low skilled, low paying, low class jobs in order just to survive day to day.

Conclusion

Over the course of the year that I followed them, the Habesha Jugglers traversed terrain in which notions of culture, the body, and politics intersected around the problems of hierarchy and inequality within the spectacular and morally ambiguous realm of the global circus market. Within these 'in-between' spaces of 'Otherness', articulations of cultural differences cut through the assemblages of the troupe's extreme bodily practices, negotiations of ethnicity (on stage and off), and experiences of brutal moments of racial segregation. Within these happenings and processes, the Habesha Jugglers produced new and creative strategies of selfhood that were initiated and elaborated across time and space (Bhabha 1994: 2). They made manifest an extreme form of habitus that was hybrid and unexpected in the context of the China acrobatics exchange, and deployed it as a valuable corporeal resource in strategizing how to grow their careers abroad.

The Habesha Jugglers were not simply the recipients of the political-cultural bodily knowledge imparted upon them during the China exchange. In China they were inculcating new, hybrid and flexible extreme forms of habitus by using the "natural forces of their bodies" (Marx 1977: 173) to become entrepreneurs skilled in the art of the cultivation, care for, and management of, their own bodily capital (Wacquant 1995: 66). They became living recursive relations that linked their own bodily labour and capital, closely dependant on one another, together within the unified field of their own bodies (Wacquant 1995: 67) across global space. The hybrid and extreme form of habitus inculcated by the Habesha Jugglers reflects new and flexible ways in which culture, the body and politics collide in the production of the body and self within drastically shifting global and cultural contexts.

In China, however, the Habesha Jugglers' positioning as Africans overshadowed their identities as individuals and Ethiopians. A stripped down version of "*Fēizhōu*" was fixed upon them by locals influenced by racial folklore on athletic aptitude and stereotypes about genetic inferiority/superiority popular in China's world of sport (Hoberman 2007: 220). Public desire to "see Africa" and to "watch black people" who had "dangerous," "fast" and "powerful bodies," was coupled with a compulsion to distance from the green and black "blood," "ugly" faces, "big lips," and bad smells of the Africans. Representation of 'difference' in China saw the body as the discursive site through which much, "'racialized knowledge' was produced and circulated" (Hall 1997: 244). The Huáxīng School of Acrobatics' staff was held responsible to micromanage the 'different' corporealities of African students, but that meant that issuing instruction necessarily happened within a nervous politics of racial exclusion (Saito 2009).

This double bind of representation that the Huáxīng school's teachers deployed to squeeze out harder and better practice from their Chinese students, trapped the Habesha Jugglers and other African circus performers in China, and so they turned as best they could towards cultivating their futures above and beyond the China cultural exchanges. Under this circumstance the appropriation of "Africans are dangerous" became more than a simple trans-coding strategy or a tactic of stereotype reversal (Hall 1997: 270-272) for Huáxīng's foreign students; "Africans are dangerous" became a trope for a culturally hybrid identification with, and commitment to, the "hard work" that they believed would eventually lead them "out to freedom."

Having both the 'cultural' knowledge and knowledge of the market, good circus agents effectively became the "middling modernizers" (Rabinow 1989), who could lead the way out to the "good life" that my interlocutors spoke of. Nelson, a man who understood the need to always "change" what one is doing to succeed in the international circus business, was emblematic of a circus agent's role as an "expert of subjectivity" (Rose 1998: 151). As a former African circus performer himself, when Nelson intervened in the Habesha Jugglers' trajectory by insisting that they, and other Africans he employed, change their acts into something more 'African' so the performances could become more of "their own," he was effectively teaching them to be "subjective beings who develop new ways of thinking about the self, acting upon the self, and making choices that help them to strive for personal fulfilment in this life" (Ong 2003: 16), just as he, himself, had done in the past. What had just moments prior been the Habesha Jugglers' chronic corporeal problem of how to "work hard" enough to escape the racializing gaze that "dislocate(d), imprison(ed), and

objectifie(d)" them (Young 2010: 2) by fixing the idea of 'biological race' into and onto their bodies in China, suddenly appeared to have a solution in the form of Nelson, who could 'culturally' transform the 'biological fact' that "for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (Fanon 1952: 10).

Nelson was an authority on the micropolitics of 'African' circus. He translated the "problematics of government into everyday operations" and "was in a position in which (he could) not only broker relations but also translate dominant discourses into micropractices that allocate, classify, categorize, and formalize categories" of the African circus performer "and then try to mould (his) subjects into exemplars of the desirable categories" (Ong 2003: 16-17). The problematics of government in the international circus arena for Nelson had to do with how to successfully channel African circus performers into the big time transnational circuit of spectacle, when their bodily skills were not necessarily up to par with other global players in the field (such as Russian, Korean, or Chinese acrobats). The solution to this problem involved introducing everyday operations to promising young Africans: micropractices such as changing the Chinese stencils on a foot juggling prop into 'zebra stripes', using 'Sudanese' music for an audition instead of 'Chinese' music, and employing 'African' style movement and choreography in their acts. Managing these processes was a central part of Nelson's strategy for achieving his long-term goals of making "as many of (himself) as possible," and ensuring that all the circus performers coming out of Africa were going through "one channel" – his.

Willingness to participate in the 'cultural' reconfiguration of their acts was 'how it worked' for the "ripe" and aspiring African circus performers who wanted to "go out"

from countries like Ethiopia, and to "work hard" in the time of "African Fever." The growing market in Europe for audiences who "needed to see Africa" gave Nelson an opportunity to capitalize on the true "value" of his African circus artists, which was determined as much by whether or not they were considered "rare," as it was by the height of their skill levels and the market's demand for them. Although Nelson embodied many of the moral and cultural ambiguities articulated in historical accounts of circus (Stoddart 2000; Kwint 1994), which has been "constitutionally international" and "strategically xenophobic" (Stoddart 2000: 71), he was clear when it came to the bottom line. If the Habesha Jugglers hadn't agreed to change their acts into a so-called 'African' style of performance while they were in China, they would not have been able to get the contract with Nelson that brought them to Europe. When his artists *did* get on board, however, Nelson's dream was to pay them a "good enough wage for Africa," and to ensure them that circus performance wasn't a "low class" job; that it was a "way" they could finally live out their own dreams, not to mention a legitimate "economic opportunity" for them and their families. This amounted to Nelson doling out weekly salaries that were far below standard for the international level his artists were playing and performing at in the industry.

However, the Habesha Jugglers and other circus performers in Circus of Africa recognized in Nelson a fellow African and a paternal figure who knew their true "value," and so they conceded to playing to stereotypes of the 'happy native' (Hall 1997: 245) for the sake of his show and the opportunity for a better life that it, and he, would hopefully bring them. Under Nelson's guidance, 'cultures', props, costumes, music and movements were made more innovatively 'African' in order to appeal to a European audience's desires and tastes, which entailed exhibiting "African power"

and diversifying the ethnicities of the artists in the production. In true circus fashion (Davis 2002), Nelson capitalized on his audience members' inability to distinguish between the diverse cultures and bodies that 'Africa' had to offer them, and he transformed Tanzanians and Ethiopians into Zimbabweans, Ugandans, and citizens of Djibouti. For the majority of Nelson's artists, making this concession happened with a sense of ambivalence that was an unavoidable product of the process of self-making (Ong 2003: 16) - even if this time self-making happened as part of an onstage representation of 'Africa' and its people.

The stereotypes the Habesha Jugglers played to in Europe weren't just attached to them when they were on stage performing, however; they bled over into backstage life. Crew members perceived the artists as embodiments of binary stereotypes similar to the ones that had been projected onto them in China. The artists were 'happy natives' who were "running around" all day, needing to "make some noises" and looking for something to "play with." They were "too dark" to be seen, and so needed someone to "look out" for them. They were a threat because "nobody really (knew) them." They were "freaks." They were "children." They were "confused" about technology, and how to properly operate standard European material objects - even their very own props for the show. They believed in "bad ghosts," used witch doctors to cure illnesses, and got possessed on the tour. They got pregnant, and had to be sent back to Africa because they couldn't control themselves sexually. Instead of living up to the promise that Europe held for the Habesha Jugglers while they were still in China, the 'too dark to be seen' Africans were made aware by the off stage behaviour of the technicians, the gaze of the audiences during performance, and the reactions of the public in the towns, that there was "no such possibility in an antiblack world (for

them to be perceived as human) because a black person is immediately caught out there by white eyes in the visual field of human perception as either hypervisible or invisible as Ralph Ellison articulates in *Invisible Man*" (Mahendran 2007: 193). Europe began to resemble China in that individual and national identities mattered little in comparison to what it meant to be 'African' according to the *European* Gaze, and the Habesha Jugglers and other African circus performers continued to have to navigate and strategize within the confines of fixed racial stereotypes and representations, on stage and off. Practices of racial segregation also appeared, although in slightly different, unspoken, form. While enjoying the "power" of the 'African' performances, the technicians tried to maintain order and keep a 'safe' distance from the unpredictable and "dangerous" Africans by adhering to unspoken rules of distance and inhabiting separate buses, attending different social events, eating separately, and consuming 'different' types of food. The on tour relationship between the 'technicians' and the 'artists' swiftly morphed into an encounter between the "Germans" and the "Africans." Running counter to this racially based divide was the propensity, just as in China, for the African artists to privilege culturally hybrid forms of identity that emphasized a negotiation of ethnicity amongst and between themselves as one unified, though divided, segregated group of artists (Back 1996).

Identity politics and problem of representations notwithstanding (Hall 1997; Dixon & Peachey 2012), the majority of the Habesha Jugglers and other artists' explicit focuses and time spent were on the corporeal "work" they had been brought on tour to do. This work did not concern itself with displaying 'culture,' or expressing 'Africa' as such. And although they participated in inadvertently playing to stereotypes in performance, five minutes on stage did not compare with the daily hours, months, and

years of sweat they put into training their acts. The spirit of corporeal entrepreneurship necessary for circus performers who were trying to make their "way" in the international world of spectacle was indeed part of the consciousness of Circus of Africa's artists. Their participation in the corporeal economy of circus, where they literally inhabited a triple duty role as the simultaneous 'raw' fleshly material, labour working both in and on themselves, and the final corporeal product to be showcased in Nelson's production, was certainly not lost on them (Wacquant 2001, 2004). The importance of making "good money" from one's "sweat" was tied to the bigger goal of making a "good life" back at home, but compromises were made in the spirit of reciprocity with the paternal figure of Nelson when reluctant Ethiopian circus performers agreed to do his show in Tanzania. The potential time that could be spent cultivating one's body in Dar es Salaam was perceived as a corporeal investment that would result in higher salaries over a longer period of time, and be worth the immediate and short-lived pay cut they would have to endure in order to perform in Africa. Likewise, a willingness to be exploited as cheap labour under the circumstances – to do something for Nelson – was justified because of Nelson's prior 'investment' in doing something for the Habesha Jugglers, and in order to ensure he would continue to do things for them in the future. However, corporeal "work," and the bodies that engaged in it, was never entirely free from the viscerally located racial dislocation the African circus performers were pinned by in the transnational everyday life of a tour. In those contexts, being able to work hard and succeed in order to live out a dream to "do everything like white people" while being paid "a good enough wage for Africa" was all too often sadly the bottom line. Perhaps Fanon's phenomenological resignation to a destiny of Whiteness is not a notion to be shaken off after all.

Ta-Nahisi Coates has recently reminded us that:

> All our phrasing – race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy – serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth… (and) that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body (Coates 2015: 10).

This is doubly so in the world of circus, where the practice is "so intensely corporeal," it becomes, "a universe in which the most essential is transmitted, acquired, and deployed beneath language and consciousness - in short… (it is) *an institution made man*" (Wacquant 2004: xi, emphasis in the original). The role of the body and the senses in perpetuating race thinking (Smith 2006) within the context of the exchanges and subsequent European circus touring further served to locate 'difference' within the limits of a 'black body' (Young 2010: 1-25) subject to the outside regulation of Huáxīng's teachers and the outside Gaze of Circus of Africa's technicians. This saw the Habesha Jugglers, other Africans training at the school, and performers on the touring production exposed to a truly inculcated version of Fanon's phenomenological sense of alienation from "the refusal of the 'Other' to give recognition 'from the place of the other', to the black person" (Hall 1997: 238; ibid. 1996; Bhabha 1986).

The dismantling of the Habesha Jugglers happened under the pressure from Urban Vibe Circus for bodies and bodily skills that were more trained and developed than theirs were. Urban Vibe Circus wasn't looking to display 'difference' to its audience. Instead it wanted to hold up a mirror to spectators that would reflect their culture back to themselves in a way that appealed to them in the form of extraordinarily powerful black and brown African American and African corporealities that were highly

trained and powerful to watch. In fact, Urban Vibe Circus's talent had to be even *more* skilled, powerful, and committed on stage in order to pull off this type of trans-coding strategic objective (Hall 1997: 270). An entertainment form meant to uplift and empower its African American community audiences by showing them their own greatness, which was located in the highly trained and skilled bodies of performers who, however different, were *just like them*, and needed to be even *more* than extraordinary. Accordingly, in Urban Vibe Circus, the anomaly of being an 'Ethiopian' or 'African' circus performer didn't carry the same heavy collateral as it had in Germany. The circuses that the Habesha Jugglers had been a part of in Europe, including Circus of Africa, had played to predominantly wealthy, white German markets who needed to "see Africa" and to embrace the colourful, enthusiastic, and unpredictable energy of 'African' circus, where, when an artist made a mistake it was considered to be "no problem." They needed to bear witness to an 'African' circus that stayed true to the "African power" of infectious "happiness" as it built to crescendo in a diplomatic display of "African Fever," unable to be averted or denied by its white spectators, who were all "feeling it." But the U.S. and Urban Vibe Circus was a different story, and a different market, altogether. For the first time since the Habesha Jugglers had left Ethiopia for the cultural exchange in China, performing 'Africa' in the way that they had learned how to do it just wasn't going to cut it.

The Dream of a bigger and better future and "freedom" in a 'Western' circus had carried the Habesha Jugglers through that tough "bad year" when I initially met them in China. Along with the 'practice', the 'group', and the ultimate search for 'freedom', the 'Dream' was one of the four constants that held the Habesha Jugglers' focus across drastically shifting contexts in the field. Whether they were practicing in

China, Europe, or Ethiopia, things were routine in terms of the physical motions they were going through. In the 'Foreign Students Hall' in Huáxīng, on countless European stages, or tucked away within the walls of an inconspicuous gym in Ethiopia, they were there, together, tossing clubs, throwing jars, and juggling tables - one unified force of corporeal action with a Dream that carried them through it (whatever 'it' happened to be at the moment) and hopefully "out to freedom." Until "their group was no longer their group," that is: until the Dream of a better life and going "out to freedom" rubbed up against the dislocating violent logic of corporeal racism abroad. Until their inherent "value(s)" as human beings were ambivalently called into question by the mediators and proprietors whose interests were staked in a racialized and ethnicized corporeal economy of circus that mattered more than the worth of a single human being. And until the fact that the price tags on their acts in Europe - which had as much to do with their 'rarity' as 'African' circus performers as it did with their skill level - were problematized in the U.S. The broader international economy of hierarchicalized circus bodies demonstrated the fluid and uncomfortable reality that what "African power" *was* worth, did not hold the same weight in one place as it did in another. In the end, for the Habesha Jugglers the shifting cultural contexts of living in highly trained, valuable, and "rare" black bodies while negotiating the viscerally rooted violence of racism in an unforgiving global marketplace, both reflected and refracted the question of what layers of meaning their search for freedom might have implied after all.

By telling the Habesha Jugglers' simple and profound story in this thesis, it has been my hope to contribute to a global anthropology of circus, and to speak to broader issues of Chinese/African relations, (Africa) diaspora identities, analyses of diverse

forms of racism transculturally, knowledge transmission, and the production of bodies and selves across time and international space. Within the broader political economy they found themselves negotiating in the field, the Habesha Jugglers and other Ethiopian circus performers I encountered wound up being transformed, and transforming themselves, in very surprising ways; ways in which saw them inhabit the roles of active agents participating in increasing their own corporeal mobilities through building, and exercising, practices of extreme action and disciplinary flexibility that eventually took them around the world. Their story, however, serves as a reminder to us that the "freedom" the Habesha Jugglers gained access to had its limits; their newfound mobility was always tempered by having to navigate diverse racial and cultural stereotypes and constraints wherever they went within an industry that ambiguously preyed on radical notions of difference and bodily anomaly is its most valuable global product.

GLOSSARY OF CIRCUS TERMS[161]

Acrobatics: individual or partner skills involving strength and dexterity, including body rotations, twists, flips, balances, jumps and turns. Can be performed on tumbling mats, trampoline, tightwire or trapeze ("Acrobatics," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Antipodism: see 'foot juggling'.

Base: the person on the bottom of a two (or more) person balance or move. In a group act, the base lifts, catches or assists the flyer ("Base," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Basics: refers to the four foundational skills of acrobatics training in China, which are handstands, leg flexibility, waist flexibility and tumbling (Farrell 2007: 128).

Bounce Juggling: juggling that involves balls being deliberately bounced off of a floor or wall. Silicone balls are widely used for bounce juggling, though lacrosse balls and tennis balls can also be used ("Bounce Juggling," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Chinese Pole: vertical steel poles on which performers climb, slide down, hold poses and jump between. The poles are generally between 3 and 9 metres in height and approximately 3 to 4 inches in diameter ("Chinese Poles," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Club Juggling: see 'juggling'.

Clown/Comedy: the art of performing as a clown. Character clowns have exaggerated facial features, and are sometimes called hobo or tramp clowns ("Clowning," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

[161] Unless stated otherwise, all definitions that are followed by in-text citations that look like this: ("Juggling," def.) are quoted verbatim from the NICA Circus Dictionary (*NICA*. Web. 2015). The scope of definitions included in this glossary is not intended to be all encompassing of circus as a genre; specific content was selected for the purposes of contextualizing events in this thesis.

Contortion: an acrobatic art that involves a performer bending their (sic) body into hyper-flexible, extraordinary positions. This skill can be combined with hand or head balancing, and can also be performed on trapeze ("Contortion," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Cycling: a circus act often learned in China consisting of a large group of people on a bicycle riding forwards, backwards, and perform jumps and other balancing skills together.

Diabolo: a traditional Chinese circus apparatus, shaped like an hourglass with a metal axle in the middle. The artist manipulates this top-like equipment by a piece of string with handles at each end ("Diabolo," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Doubles/Duo: terms that describe any circus act that involves two people.

Flag: a traditional Chinese acrobatics skill that entails the waving of a large red flag as performers tumble over and under it as its moved.

Flexibility: two of the four 'basics' of Chinese acrobatic training (legs and waist flexibility).

Flipping: see 'tumbling'.

Flyer: an artist who performs skills in the air while being supported, suspended, thrown or caught by a base or catcher ("Flyer," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Foot Juggling: a traditional Chinese acrobatics skill which involves juggling objects such as a jar, table, parasols, and carpets with one's feet while inverted and reclined on an apparatus made specifically for the purposes of antipodism.

Gymnastics: a competitive sport in which individuals perform optional and prescribed acrobatic feats mostly on special apparatus in order to demonstrate strength, balance, and body control ("Gymnastics," def. *Merriam-Webster*. Web. 2015).

Hand Balancing: an act in which the majority of skills involve the performer balancing on their (sic) hands ("Hand Balancing," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Handstand: an acrobatic movement in which a performer is positioned in a vertical upright position on the floor by balancing on their (sic) hands ("Handstand," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015). Handstand is also one of the four 'basics' of Chinese acrobatic training.

Handstand Blocks: pieces of wood used in handstand training, with dimensions approximately 160mm x 85mm x 60mm. Handstand blocks can also be stacked on top of one another or attached to canes… and used in handstand acts ("Handstand Blocks," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Hand-to-Hand: an acrobatic act in which one or more acrobats do hand-balancing in the hands of a (base) ("Hand-to-hand," def. *Circopedia*. Web. 2015).

Hat juggling: a traditional Chinese acrobatics juggling skill which involves throwing and catching hats alternately between one's hands and one's head.

Hoop Diving: An act involving performers diving, jumping, twisting and somersaulting through and over hoops which are stacked on top of each other. The hoops are flat and wide, made of steel, wood or plastic, allowing them to balance on top of one another ("Hoop Diving," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Hula-Hoops: circular plastic hoops approximately 80cm in diameter, used to twirl around different parts of the body. Performers can manipulate one or multiple hoops at the same time ("Hula Hoops," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Jar Juggling: a traditional Chinese acrobatics skill in which a large jar is thrown, caught, and balanced in different ways on the top of one's head.

Juggling: the skill of keeping a number of objects in the air at the same time, by continuously throwing and catching the objects. Juggling requires good hand-eye coordination. The performer can use different methods to throw and catch the objects.

Examples of objects used for juggling are clubs, rings, balls, scarves, knives, fire clubs, chainsaws, fruit, etc. ("Juggling," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Kicking Bowls: an act in which the performer balances a base bowl on their head, and bowls are kicked one by one from the foot onto the stack on the performer's head ("Bowl Kicking," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Kung Fu (Gōngfū): for purposes of this thesis, a modern form of Chinese martial arts.

Lion Dance: a traditional Chinese acrobatics act/dance in which the performers are masked and costumed as lions.

Magic: the performance of staged illusions or tricks.

Măxì: Mandarin term for circus. See thesis introduction for elaboration.

Meteor Juggling: a manipulation apparatus consisting of a ball and chain, one held in each hand by finger-loops, allowing the performer to swing the apparatus around their body very quickly ("Poi," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Perch Pole: consists of a tall steel pole about 25 feet high and weighing about 50 pounds with interchangeable top and bottom pieces. These top and bottom pieces are designed for variations of the act. The standard bottom piece is designed for a base to balance the pole on his shoulders and contains grips for holding the pole with his hands, while a substitute bottom piece may be used for a base who wishes to balance the pole on his head. Still another variation uses a special belt and handles to balance the pole. Interchangeable tops include a chair, hand balancing canes, and a leg lock, though other specialized applications are also available ("Balancing perch pole," def. *Simply Circus*. Web. 2015).

Press to Handstand: a controlled entry into a handstand, using strength rather than momentum ("Press to Handstand," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Quick Change: is a type of illusion, and an act in which a performer changes quickly from one costume to another costume in a manner which disguises how he or she did it.

Rope: otherwise known as Corde Lisse, it is a single length of rope hanging from above, on which an aerialist performs manoeuvres such as climbing, wraps, rolls, drops and positions of flexibility and strength ("Rope," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Russian Bar: an apparatus made of three fastened vaulting poles strapped together to create a flexible beam. This group act involves a minimum of two bases balancing the beam on their shoulders, and one flyer standing on the beam, with the flyer bouncing and performing aerial tricks and landing on the bar or sometimes on a pyramid ("Russian Bar," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Slack Line/Wire: a hanging wire suspended between two points, on which balancing movements can be performed ("Slack Wire," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Straps: an aerial apparatus consisting of two narrow bands made of close-woven material fastened to the truss. By wrapping the strap ends around hands and wrists, the performer performs holds, twists, rolls and manoeovres, requiring extreme strength and precision similar (to) men's rings in gymnastics ("Straps," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

T'ai Chi (Tàijí): a Chinese form of slow and controlled martial arts movements.

Teeterboard: similar to a seesaw, this apparatus involves a 350mm board, with the performer standing on the lowered end, and the other performers jumping onto the upper end, sending the flyer into the air. Teeterboard can involve anywhere from 2-10 people. Sometimes the performers jump from a tower onto the board, creating greater power to propel the flyer into the air and enabling bigger tricks. The flyer can land on the floor or atop a pyramid ("Teeterboard," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Tightwire: A cable stretched tightly between two points. The performer will 'walk the wire' and perform other difficult jumps, leaps, balances and acrobatics ("Tightwire," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Tissu: an aerial apparatus made from a length of fabric in various colours and with varying amounts of stretch. Similar manoeuvres to Corde Lisse are performed by the aerialist, who climbs up and down the fabric, wrapping sections around the body to hang, drop and slide during the performance ("Tissu or Silks," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Training: the time in which an artist practices and refines their skills ("Training," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Trampoline: considered an aerial apparatus on which acrobatics are performed.

Traditional Chinese Acrobatics: see thesis introduction.

Trapeze: an aerial apparatus with a small round bar suspended by ropes or metal straps from the truss. This genre can include static, swinging and flying trapeze, and can be performed solo, double trapeze, triple trapeze or as a group act ("Trapeze," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Tumbling: a generic term to describe combinations of ground based acrobatic tricks. Tumbling can include cartwheel, round off, somersault, backflip, handspring, backflip, back/front sault, and somersaults with single or multiple rotations and twists ("Tumbling," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015). Tumbling is also one of the four 'basics' of Chinese acrobatic training.

Unicycle: a one-wheel bicycle with a small seat (or sometimes without a seat) upon which the performer rides forwards, backwards, performs jumps and other balancing skills. Unicycles come in different heights and different sized wheels ("Unicycle," def. *NICA*. Web. 2015).

Wushu (Wǔshù): for purposes of this thesis, a modern sport form of Chinese martial art.

Zájì: Mandarin term for traditional Chinese acrobatics. See thesis introduction for elaboration.

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